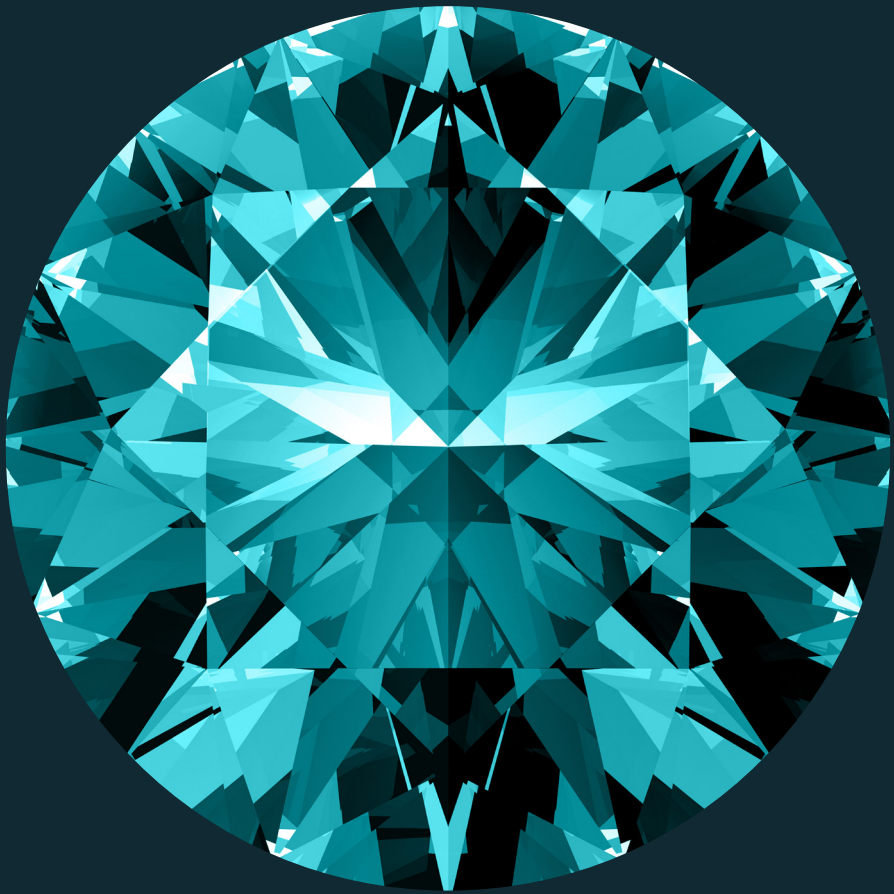
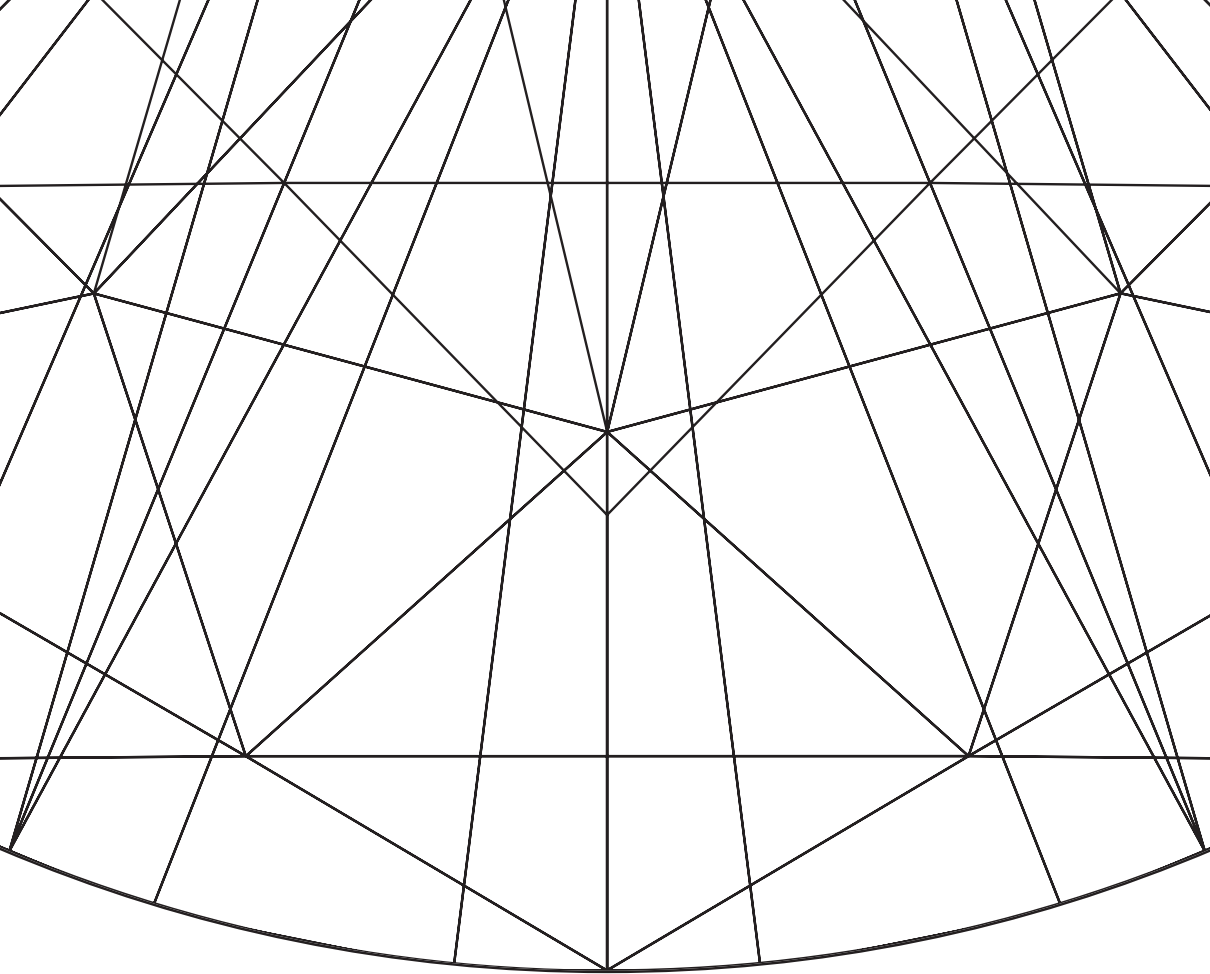




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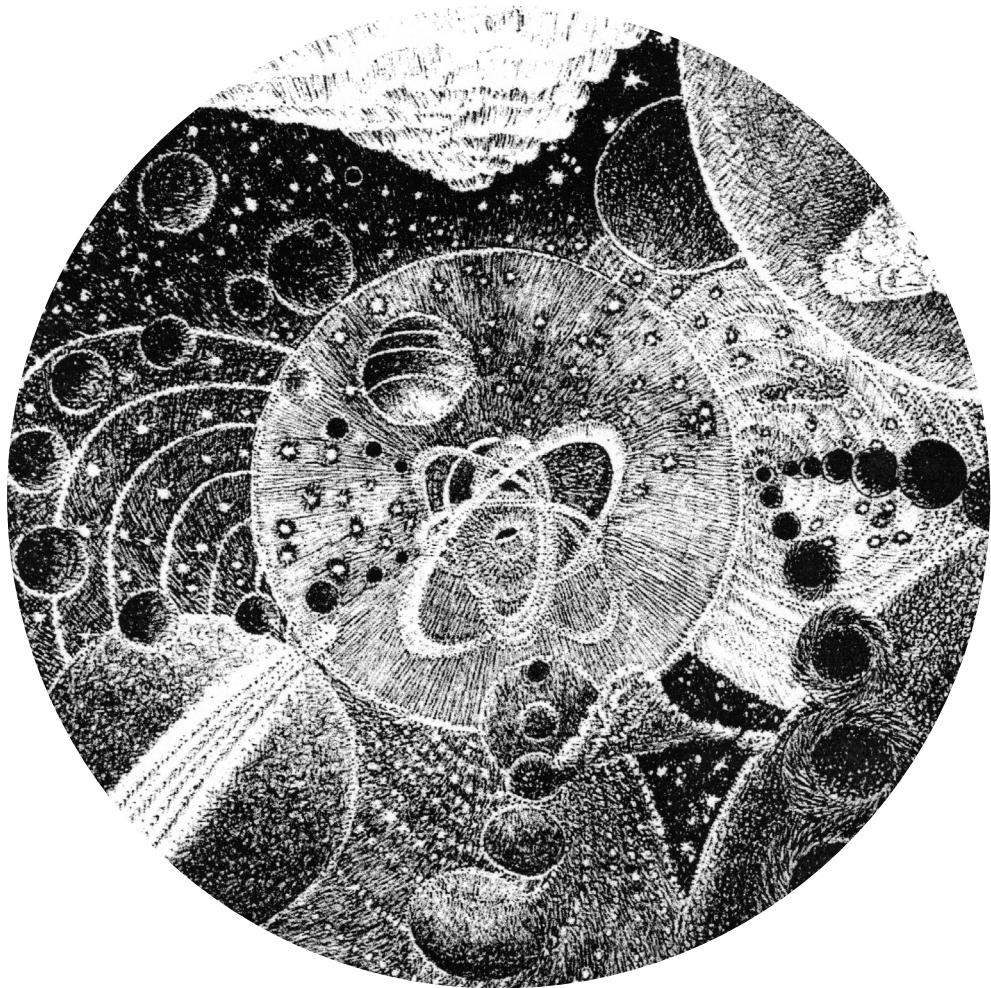
HAPPILY EVER AFTER

VOLUME
THREE **People**

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE GOALS AND PRIORITIES



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‘What is the Best Religion?’

The question posed in the title here might hint that there could be some bias in the views about to be expounded. Nevertheless, I will endeavour to reflect about religious faith and commitment, and attachment to opinions, in a way that is useful for all of us, irrespective of our specific religious disposition, if we have one. I certainly do not presume that everybody reading this is a card-carrying, flag-waving Buddhist.

One of the aspects of Amaravati Monastery that Ajahn Sumedho was keen to establish, from its very foundation, was that it would be a meeting place and a spiritual resource for people of all faiths. Over the years many interfaith gatherings have been held here, so it would be a mistake to turn this exploration of faith and opinions into a carrying of the torch just for Theravāda Buddhism. Particularly in these times religious extremism is much in the news, with shocking and painful reports about the activities of some groups.

That said, ardent adherence to a religious tradition is not something that is confined just to this era or any one religion, and there are wholesome and unwholesome ways in which such ardour can be exercised. I used to live

in California, at Abhayagiri Monastery, next door to Holy Transfiguration Monastery, (a.k.a. Mount Tabor) a Christian community of Ukrainian Catholic monks. They are also a forest monastic community. Venerable Master Hsüan Hua, of The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, generously gave us the land, which happened to be right beside this Christian monastery. When we were introduced to the abbot there, a wonderful elderly Belgian forest monk called Archimandrite Boniface, just after the deeds to the land had been given to us, his first comment when we met was, 'I think there are enough monasteries in this valley already.' 'Very nice to meet you too, father!' I thought.

When it was pointed out that we had already accepted the gift of the land and we would be moving in next door, he adapted with impressive speed and we became quite good friends – even though he had pretty much assumed that we were worshippers of the devil. They even had their own handmade road sign beside the driveway into their monastery emblazoned with a pitchfork-bearing devil with a line through it – a road sign saying, 'Devils not allowed here.' I'm not joking. Somebody once made their own 30-mile-an-hour signs for St. Margaret's Lane, but there was a 'No Devils allowed' sign for Mount Tabor Monastery.

When I was travelling with Luang Por Sumedho in Egypt, in 2006, we went to visit a couple of Coptic monasteries. These ancient monasteries of the

Desert Fathers had been there for many centuries, some of them for 1500 or 1600 years. In a similar way to the Venerable Father Boniface, the Coptic brother who met us was very polite, very friendly, and showed us around as was his duty, but he made it clear that we were considered to be devil worshippers and definitely were infidels – but we were very welcome to visit! Ajahn Vimalo made the wisecrack, ‘You used to have these big walls to keep out the invading tribespeople, and now you have to open the doors and let us all in.’

‘Yes, yes, times change.’

To be an infidel, literally means to be one who is ‘not of your faith’ (from the Latin *in-* = ‘not’ + *fidēlis* = ‘faithful’). Despite the familiar usage of the term in the Middle East and Europe, the same kind of demonisation, mythic defamation, is found within Buddhist countries and within other religions too. It is not confined to Christianity and Islam, but can be found in India, Sri Lanka and Burma, Thailand and all around the world.

When we were visiting the Copts in the desert, we asked them for some details about their theology. This monk who was showing us around was very articulate. He said, ‘We are *miaphysites*. We are not *monophysites*.’ One could feel just how important that distinction was to him, ‘No, we wouldn’t make that mistake, we’d never think you were monophysites.’

He continued, ‘We believe that Christ possessed two natures, a divine and a human one, united in a single person – two natures perfectly united, *not* unified.’

I am not making fun of it, but what sounded like exact equivalents to an outsider was, for him, an insider, an extremely serious distinction; they were *not* monophysites, they were *miaphysites*. They did not have wrong views, like the other lot.

This is a tendency that we have throughout the world religious community, focusing with vehemence on our favoured perspective, out of faith and commitment, and defaming and dismissing ‘the other’. For example, in the Buddhist world: ‘We’re Theravādans. We’re *Thai forest tradition* Theravādans. We’re not Mahāyānists, you know, *that lot*. Or Vajrayānists, like some of those Tibetans. Perish the thought of those Zen people too. Ugh. We’re not like *them*. We’re bearers of the Banner of the Arahants, the true way.’ On reading this some of you might be thinking, ‘Well, aren’t we?’

This area is useful to look at and to contemplate because we can see all around us the degree of pain and misery such clinging to religious views has caused in the world, and in our own communities too. What happens when one group takes sides against another based on religious prejudice, just because somebody has a Muslim name or a Hindu name or a Buddhist name or a Christian name?

I used to visit Belfast in Northern Ireland in the '80s; I went there several times over a couple of years. It was a war zone. There were patrols of British soldiers on the streets, frequent checkpoints and the police stations had 30 foot high steel walls all around them, to ward off rocket attacks. As a Buddhist monk I was surprised to learn that I was totally safe when walking around Belfast. One day, as I was going with some people from the Buddhist group to a meal invitation at somebody's house that was right on the Falls Road, the main Catholic area, one of them said, 'Don't worry, Ajahn. There won't be anybody who is going to have a go at you. Dressed like that you're definitely neither a Protestant nor a Catholic. You're not on either side so they won't even see you.' It was true. I wasn't carrying the insignia of being either a Protestant or a Catholic, so it was one of the few places in the West where as a Buddhist monastic I was invisible – the Protestants and the Catholics were both hyper-alert to signs that defined 'the other,' but as a Buddhist I was outside the game.



This clinging to religious views is useful to look at because it causes stress within our communities. Clinging to views is one of the four different kinds of *upādāna*, grasping, attachment. The Buddha outlines four particular kinds of clinging. There is *kāmupādāna*, 'clinging to sense-desire'; *sīlabbatupādāna*, 'clinging to conventions and religious forms'; *attavādupādāna*, 'clinging to ideas about yourself'; and lastly 'clinging to views and opinions',

diṭṭhupādāna. Believing in a religious system, and attaching to it, this is in the domain of *diṭṭhupādāna*, ‘clinging to views and opinions’ as well as *sīlabbatupādāna*, ‘clinging to conventions’. It is something that the Buddha pointed to over and over again.

When the Buddha is talking about different religious adherents he points out that if anyone says, ‘Only this is true, everything else is wrong,’ that indicates that this person has missed their path. They are pursuing their faith in a way that is going to cause division and thereby suffering, difficulty and obstruction. The very thought, ‘We are the ones with the true faith, everyone else is an infidel,’ or ‘Everyone else has got Wrong View,’ demonstrates the extreme clinging that is there. The view might be coming from a sincere intention or an enthusiastic sense of, ‘I think this is great!’ Nevertheless, if we grasp it in this way, it will definitely cause us problems.

There is a wonderful phrase that Ajahn Chah used that typifies this stance: ‘You can be right in fact, but wrong in Dhamma.’ Which is to say, ‘What you say about your faith and the teachings might be true, but the way you relate to other people who don’t agree with you, is out of keeping with the Dhamma.’ It’s as if you have a club with *mettā* written on it that you are bludgeoning people with, in your effort to propagate Buddhist loving-kindness.

With respect to the attachment to views and opinions, *diṭṭhupādāna*, those who are familiar with the *Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta* might recognize a phrase in it that is relevant to this exploration: *diṭṭhiñca anupagamma*. It comes at the end of the *sutta*; the last verse begins with this:

*Diṭṭhiñca anupagamma
 Silavā dassanena sampanno
 Kāmesu vineyya gedhaṃ
 Na hi jātu gabbha-seyyaṃ punareti'ti*

Which is translated as:

By not holding to fixed views,
 the pure hearted one,
 having clarity of vision,
 being freed from all sense-desires,
 is not born again into this world.

Those ‘fixed views’ are an embodiment of clinging. If we look at the Buddha’s teaching, over and over again, he describes how it is clinging, attachment, *upādāna* that is the fuel of trouble, of *dukkha*. Over and over again the Buddha explains that even clinging to the good, to rightness, will bring *dukkha*. It will bring a sense of division, alienation and conflict within ourselves and between ourselves and others. As Ajahn Chah put it, ‘You can be right in fact but wrong in Dhamma.’



There is an interesting story on this theme that concerns the establishment, or more accurately *reestablishment*, of Buddhism in Indonesia. As I heard the story, it goes something like this: Indonesia used to be a Buddhist country up until about five hundred years ago. At a certain point the crown prince had been converted to Islam, and he came to the king, put his sword to the king's throat and said, 'I am now a Muslim and you are a Buddhist. This country should be guided by my new faith. I'm taking over.' His father in true Buddhist fashion said, 'Very well, please, have the throne, you are welcome to it. I'll go to the woods.' The father stepped down from the throne and handed it over to his son.

The former king and his chief minister, who was very well-known and well-respected as a meditator, both became yogis. They went off to live in the forest and became lay meditators. Before they left, the chief minister made a prophecy saying, 'Buddhism is now going to disappear from this nation, but in five hundred years' time it will arise again.' Lo and behold, Venerable Narada Thera, a famous Sri Lankan elder, for some reason had the opportunity and the idea, back in the late '50s, early '60s, that it would be good to visit Indonesia. He started going there and offering Dhamma teachings almost exactly 500 years after the prophecy was made, quite by chance.

Venerable Narada Thera was an eminent, brilliant teacher and writer, a genuine Buddhist Master. There were five Indonesian men who became his students and took up the monk's life under his guidance. This marked the reintroduction of Buddhism into Indonesia.

At a certain point, one of the five monks decided that he was of a higher calibre, that he understood the teaching better than the others and that they didn't really deserve to be wielding much influence. He decided to make some moves to establish his authority. During these years in Indonesia (after 1945) the government had established their own version of the Pañcasila, their own Five Precepts which were principles like the establishment of justice, democracy, and the unity of the nation. They weren't really related to the Buddhist Five Precepts, but they used the same name. The first one is 'Belief in the one true God'.

This bhikkhu who was angling for supremacy came up with the idea of a theistic Buddhism which would be fully in keeping, so he reckoned, with Article #1 of the new Pañcasila. Thus his brand of Buddhism would be in accord with what was now Indonesian law. While the other lot, he could condemn as illegal, going against Article #1 of the new Pañcasila, because they were teaching a kind of Buddhism that had no central God figure. He put his reworked theistic Buddhism forward, saying it was simply a different way of worshipping God, using slightly different language, and spoke out against the more conventional members of the group.

To their great credit, the Indonesian Government received this complaint and they decided, ‘We need to look into this.’ They gathered together a group of Islamic scholars, academic imams, and the four other monks, and said, ‘We have received these accusations that your religion contravenes Article #1 of the Pañcasila. This is a serious matter. Religious philosophy is not the terrain of politicians and lawyers so please explain to these imams what your teaching is about. Please lead them through your scriptures, then we’ll decide whether these teachings are in accord with Article #1 of the Pañcasila or not.’

They went into a huddle over the texts and, a few weeks later, the imams came out and said something like, ‘These classical Theravāda teachings are perfectly in accordance with Islam. There is nothing in the Pali Canon that these monks revere that goes against our faith. However, we have to inform the authorities that, after reviewing these classical texts we also reviewed the texts being referred to by the complainant and – to be frank – his kind of Buddhism doesn’t have any basis. It’s a weak philosophy that he has largely invented himself. It doesn’t have any credibility.’ So *he* was the one that got banned, hoisted by his own petard, whereas the other four got the go-ahead and were allowed to function freely by the Indonesian Government. This was a story told to me by the Sangharāja of Indonesia, the head of the Buddhist Sangha there. So, not only clinging to your views but also trying to put other people down has its negative karmic results.



Another event that illustrates these issues is the source of the title of this chapter. It comes from an incident that happened in the '80s at The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, a large monastery of the Northern Buddhist tradition in California established by Master Hsüan Hua, who was the one who gave the land that formed the original property of Abhayagiri Monastery. Like Luang Por Sumedho, Master Hua had a very ecumenical spirit, he was committed to the principles of interfaith understanding and mutual respect between religions – he was good friends with Cardinal Yu Bin, of the Catholic Church. The very fact that he was a Mahāyāna Buddhist teacher who gave 120 acres of land to us as a free gift to start a Theravāda monastery shows how very broad-minded and big-hearted he was.

He organized an interfaith conference at The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas where different Buddhist traditions, different Christian, Hindu and Muslim traditions, all gathered together for a four or five day event. Ajahn Sumedho was invited to be part of that.

As soon as the conference began, some local fundamentalist Christians started picketing it. They made placards and they were obstructing the entrance of the monastery. It's a big place, the Monastery used to be the State Psychiatric Hospital for Northern California, so it was a big institution with a full-sized roadway into it. This fundamentalist Christian group was

standing with their placards defending their faith and trying their best to keep all these various ‘devil worshippers’ from corrupting the spiritual life of the local people. As this started happening, some of the monks came to the Abbot and said, ‘Venerable Master! There’s all these Christians, they’re making a big fuss, they’re blocking the road and harassing all the people coming to the conference! What are we going to do?’ They were in a bit of a dither, stressed and upset.

Master Hua, being the kind of person he was, said, ‘Invite them in, of course. Please welcome them into the conference.’ I suspect there was a moment of pause in the disciples’ thought stream; then ‘OK, the Master says invite them in, so let’s invite them in.’ They came into the hall and joined the rest of the group, at first the new arrivals were very suspicious and uptight. In many of the discussions they would leap in and say, ‘In the gospel of St. John, chapter fourteen, verse number two, Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life!”’ and so on. After a while, what with the general aura of friendliness, welcoming tolerance and listening, things settled down. After three or four days, a friendly, easy atmosphere had formed between everyone.

Just before the conference finished it was time for Master Hua to give his own talk. He hadn’t got up onto the stage for any kind of presentation up to that point, he had been hosting things, but he had not given any talks. Now

he was on the schedule to give the final discourse for the event. He stepped to the podium and the first thing he said was, ‘I’d like to ask everybody a question. I’d like to ask “Whose religion is the best religion?”’

When Luang Por Sumedho came back to Amaravati and told us about this, he said, ‘When Master Hua said that, I thought “Oh no! It was all going so well!” I could feel a sort of shrivelling, shrinking inside. “Oh dear. This is going to be painful.” But Master Hua is quite a performer, “Whose religion is the best religion?” He slowly looked around the hall. I thought, “We’re going to get a real Buddhist diatribe now; here it comes.” He let a pregnant pause develop. But what he then surprised us all with was, “Whose religion is best? Why, *yours* is, of course, because if your religion wasn’t the best then you’d change to another one.”’ Luang Por Sumedho described how Master Hua then gave his talk about how we all start from where faith arises within us; what is the cause of faith, what is meaningful to us. We each have a completely unique and individual experience. We all see this place from a slightly different angle, or a very different angle. We all have different personalities, different ages, different bodies, different conditionings and languages, different family stories. Each of us has our own completely unique perspective. It is this that leads to our attachment to views and opinions, to taking sides. It was an inspired and spiritually brilliant exposition.

Each one of us starts from where our faith arises and that faith is going to be conditioned by the way we articulate it and act on it; it is going to be coloured by the family we are born into, the language we speak, the mental imagery that arises in our mind. Also, it is shaped by the kind of experiences that we have. You have a moment of great peace and then an image of Krishna comes into your mind because you're a Hindu, or the Virgin Mary appears in your mind because you're a Catholic, or Guan Yin Bodhisattva arises in your mind because you're a Chinese Buddhist. The way that we articulate things, and the way that we form our faith, is from experiences rooted in our own lives. That is where we start from, so we can't validly say, 'My vision of Krishna is real and your vision of the Virgin Mary is not.' Or we can, but this is necessarily a partial view. It is like saying to someone across the room, 'Is my finger pointing to the left or to the right?' They would say, 'It's pointing to the right. I would say, 'No, you're wrong it's pointing to the left.' Same finger, but we're each looking at it from a different side.

This is one of the essential principles to consider when thinking about questions like 'Whose religion is the best religion?' It is important for us to respect the conditioning, the experiences and the perceptions of others. Sometimes, in conversation, people have recounted the basis of their faith to me. One fellow I remember, I think he was a reporter from the Daily Mail,

said he grew up in Malaysia. When he was a teenager he was out at the beach one day. He wore glasses, and his glasses fell off into the sea. He was up to his waist in the water, the water was cloudy and there were waves, and he couldn't possibly see the bottom. He was very worried he had lost his glasses. He said, 'I had this feeling, and there was a voice in my head that said, "Move your foot to the right." And I knew that if I moved my right foot a little bit to the right, that's where I'd find my glasses. I moved my foot and there were my glasses. So I believed in God from then on.' And why not? He's a teenager, supposed to be looking after his things and, 'Oh damn, my glasses! Where have they gone?' Then this voice says, 'Move your foot to the right' and then 'There are my glasses!' Those kinds of events naturally get our attention.

That finding of his glasses had obviously been a very good influence in his life. He said, 'It's difficult trying to grow up as a faithful Christian when you're a teenager, but it has really served me well.' In response to his account I would say, with all due respect, 'The fact that you had an intuition that your glasses were a foot away from your right foot, doesn't necessarily prove that there's a Creator God who conjured the Universe into being and that Jesus was his only begotten son.' Those claims are extrapolations. But, in his own view, his Christian faith had served him very well. There are other similar incidents that people recount. If it was a Buddhist person

who'd lost their glasses, they might say, 'It was Guan Yin who came to help me, so I've had faith in Guan Yin ever since.' 'Lord Krishna told me my glasses were just there on the seafloor so I am a dedicated devotee.'



This principle is something that I have contemplated for a long time. When I was eleven years old I decided to see if I could figure out the nature of God. What I was getting from the Religious Education lessons at school and in the daily chapel services didn't make much sense to me. No disrespect intended, but Church of England Christianity didn't make a lot of sense, even though I was confirmed by Archbishop Dr. Ramsey around the same time. Amidst it all, considering the Old Testament and the New Testament, it seemed like God was the most important thing, so I decided, 'I'm going to sit down and try to figure out what God is; what is this about?' Part of what I wrote at that time was: 'We create God in our own image' rather than the other way around, as per Genesis Ch. 1, Verse 27. It seemed to me, from the little I knew of the world at that young age, that we use our own experiences to create what we call God, or the ultimate reality. I didn't have the phrase 'ultimate reality' in my lexicon at that time, but effectively that's what I thought at eleven years old. I've held this view ever since.

This principle is very beautifully put by Joseph Campbell in his book and filmed interviews called *The Power of Myth*. He said:

[T]hat to which the metaphorical image of your God refers is the ultimate mystery of your own being, which is the mystery of the being of the world as well. And so this is it.

(The Power of Myth, p 263, Anchor Books, 1991)

We create a metaphorical image, we can say, ‘God is an old man with a long white beard up in the sky.’ Or we say, ‘I’m a Buddhist. I don’t believe in God but I believe in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha...’. Whether it is a Hindu theology, a Christian theology, Buddhist or atheist, or you are a staunch ‘Dawkins-ite’ and Richard Dawkins is your god, or you are a rational materialist without affiliations... however we might form it, we tend to create an image out of our own conditioning and say, ‘This is the truth.’ We create the metaphorical image of our god, our ultimate reality, out of our own conditioning. If you are born into a Sikh family in New York it’s going to be one way; if you are born into a Buddhist family in Japan it’s going to be another way; if you are born into a Buddhist family in Thailand it’s going to be another way; if you are born into an Aboriginal family in Australia it’s going to be another way; if you are born into a tribal family of the Sami in Lapland, or in the Kalahari Desert it’s going to be yet another way; and if you are born into a Church of England family in Chalfont St. Giles it’s going to be a different way too... Everywhere around the world we have our own conditioning. Our faith is going to be crafted and conditioned by our language, our education and all our experiences.

To go back to the question, ‘What’s the best religion?’ You, dear reader, could say, ‘This is all very well Ajahn, but what *is* the best religion?’ The word ‘religion’ in English comes from the Latin *religio*. To go into the etymology of it, it can be taken to mean ‘to *re-ligio*’, to reconnect or to re-link, and it was St. Augustine, a Christian theologian, who made much of that reconnecting with the divine, reconnecting with God. The writer and poet Robert Graves thought that the origin of the word ‘religion’ came from the Latin *rem legere*, which has a different meaning. It can be translated as ‘the rule of the thing’ or ‘the way in which we choose the right thing to do’, ‘what helps us to choose the right thing’. So, ‘the best religion’, if we apply the etymology in these two ways, is: ‘that which helps us to reconnect with the divine, transcendent reality’, and ‘that which helps us to do the right thing’.

It is interesting to consider the Buddhist take on this. Before going to the Buddha’s words on it, consider how it is our attachment to a view that causes our problems, our troubles. This doesn’t mean that we don’t use views, but rather that our problems come from clinging to the ideas or the customs and identity of a religion, rather than acting on what it is encouraging us to do. A religion helps us to choose the right thing or to know what is the best thing to do, it gives us guidance on how to act. The huge mistake that we make is that we tend to cling to the ideas and forms of a religion, rather than following its instructions on how to live a good life in the service of others.

When I was a child at school we studied *The Sheldon Book of Verse, Book Three*, (edited by PG Smith and JF Wilkins). There was a poem in there that had a very strong effect on me, Leigh Hunt's famous poem, *Abou Ben Adhem*.

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)
 Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,
 And saw, within the moonlight in his room,
 Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,
 An angel writing in a book of gold:—
 Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,
 And to the presence in the room he said,
 'What writest thou?' —
 The vision raised its head,
 And with a look made of all sweet accord,
 Answered, 'The names of those who love the Lord.'
 'And is mine one?' said Abou. 'Nay, not so,'
 Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,
 But cheerly still; and said, 'I pray thee, then,
 Write me as one that loves his fellow men.'
 The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night
 It came again with a great wakening light,
 And showed the names whom love of God had blest,
 And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.

In this metaphorical image, it is more important to God that people actually love each other than that they spend their time loving the idea of the religion. This had a big effect on me as a twelve-year-old. I can remember feeling, ‘Yes! That’s it, that’s what this is about.’ We so easily cling to the forms and customs, and to our idea of a religion, but we don’t follow what it asks us to do.



Within the Pali Canon, even though the Buddha talks a lot about not clinging, this does not mean that he took a stance of passivity, far from it. He was very creative and proactive in establishing his teaching and the communities of his disciples, lay and monastic, and dealing adroitly with many challenging situations. On occasion he made his points with great vigour and emphasis – he roared what is called ‘the lion’s roar’, the *sīhanāda*, which is to say, ‘Get this!’ One of the instances where he speaks in this voice is in the *Majjhima Nikāya*’s, ‘The Lesser Discourse on the Lion’s Roar’ (M 11), where the Buddha says:

Bhikkhus, only here (in this dispensation) is there a contemplative (a *samaṇa*), only here is there a second contemplative, only here a third contemplative, only here a fourth contemplative. The doctrines of others are devoid of contemplatives: that is how you should rightly roar your lion’s roar.

(M 11.2)

This seems to be saying that only in this particular tradition, only in the *Buddha-sāsana*, are there any real contemplatives, *samaṇas*. There is no *samaṇa*, there is no real religious seeker, no contemplative, of any authentic accomplishment in *any* other tradition. So it would be easy to interpret this as saying, ‘Only we are right, everybody else is wrong,’ which would seem to contradict what I wrote earlier. However, the Buddha qualifies this somewhat because when he says ‘a contemplative ... a second ... a third ... and a fourth...’ he is actually referring to the four stages of enlightenment: stream entry, once returner, non-returner, and Arahant.

What he says in another discourse clarifies this. In the *Dīgha Nikāya*, in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the Buddha has this dialogue with Subhadda, just before he passes away:

‘Enough Subhadda, I’ll teach you the Dhamma. Listen and pay close attention, I will speak.’ And the Blessed One said, ‘In any doctrine and discipline where the Noble Eightfold Path is not found, no contemplative of the first, second, third or fourth order (as in, stream enterer, once returner, non-returner or Arahant) is found. But in any doctrine and discipline where the Noble Eightfold Path is found, then contemplatives of the first, second, third or fourth order are found there.’

(D 16.5.26-7)

What he is saying is that as long as a teaching has the Eightfold Path as part of it, then that path can lead to liberation even if it’s not spelled out

in those same terms. If it doesn't have the factors of the Eightfold Path, regardless of how it presents itself, then it can't lead to liberation.

He is definitely saying that, from *his* perspective, this is the best of paths, but it's not the only path, otherwise he would have expressed himself differently. He is presenting things in the best way that he can but he is also saying – which I feel is highly significant – that if another teaching has the same qualities, then those teachings can liberate.

That is 'the lion's roar' and its qualification. Some people might interpret this *sīhanāda* as the Buddha declaring, 'I'm right, everybody else is wrong!' But I feel it is far more nuanced than that. He knew exactly what he had said on other occasions. Therefore it is useful to reflect, 'Yes, he is saying, "This is the best," as far as he is concerned, but he is also saying that, "Other expressions of the same principle work too."' Particularly in that dialogue with Subhadda, he is saying that liberation is not exclusive to his teachings; other teachings, other religious forms, as long as they have these liberating qualities, can be beneficial too.

Of course it's possible to take hold of these words and use them in a sectarian, triumphalist way, like a club to attack other expressions: '*Cūḷasīhanāda Sutta*, Ajahn! *Majjhima Nikāya sutta* number eleven, paragraph two, it says "Only in *this* teaching"! or 'In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, Ajahn, it clearly states, "This is the only way to deliverance"! People have indeed

translated *ekāyano maggo*, from that latter text, in that way. There is even a book that's entitled *The Only Way to Deliverance*. So, with the same self-righteous energy, one can take it up as a Buddhist version of, 'I am the way, the truth and the life,' then put it on a banner and go charging forward, like soldiers. But this, I would say, is to completely misunderstand what the Buddha was trying to do.

He does indeed make that kind of declaration, 'the lion's roar', but if we cling to that lion's roar saying, 'We're right, you're wrong. We have Right View, you have wrong view. We're destined for Nibbāna, you are lost in *saṃsāra*,' this is a completely non-Buddhist view. 'It is right in fact but wrong in Dhamma'; we are picking it up in an incorrect way. The Pali in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* does indeed say '*ekāyano maggo*', but this can also mean, 'a path which goes in one direction only'. It doesn't necessarily mean this expression is the *only* way. If Buddhists take it as a way of counteracting Christian fundamentalists, saying, 'You quote St. John's Gospel to us, "I am the way, the truth and the life" but the Buddha says...' and have a fight, they are not following the Buddha's Way. They are grasping the form, the idea of the religion but not following its guidance or embodying its spirit.

♦ ♦ ♦

I was once at a Western Buddhist teachers conference with HH the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. During the course of discussions it was decided that it

would be a good idea to make up a list of principles that Buddhist teachers around the world, particularly in the West, should adhere to, standards that we all agreed on. This was hammered out, about ten or twelve points, over the course of the days we were together. Number one on the list was something like, ‘Our first duty as Buddhist teachers is to promote the teachings of the Buddha and to spread the understanding of Buddhism around the world.’

When it was ready we had a session to discuss this with His Holiness. The teacher who was presenting it got halfway through the first sentence, ‘Our first duty as Buddhist teachers is to spread the teachings of the Buddha...’ and to everyone’s surprise the Dalai Lama said, ‘Stop! Stop! That’s totally wrong! Our job as Buddhist teachers is not to spread Buddhism, it’s not to convert people to our religion. That would be awful!’ The room went quiet. A few of us were thinking, ‘Er... isn’t that what we are doing?’ He carried on, ‘Our job, *our duty*, is to promote human kindness, human goodness. If people choose to be Muslims or Hindus or Christians or Buddhists, that’s up to them. We should not go up to someone and say, “You should change your religion to be Buddhist.” That would be wrong, the Buddha would never agree to that. If we promote human goodness, human understanding and kindness, then we will develop respect for each other, respect for each other’s good hearts.

What religion we choose to follow doesn't matter. That choice is for each person to make.'

I felt that this approach was very wise and wholesome, very noble and practical. Like Abou ben Adhem, His Holiness was advocating putting the kind and respectful, on-the-ground human relationships above the idea or the form of the religion. Amaravati is definitely a Buddhist monastery but it is a spiritual centre as well. All those who live in this monastery are committed Buddhist practitioners but it was also set up by Luang Por Sumedho as a spiritual sanctuary for people of all faiths. Over the years we have had many interfaith gatherings, and I feel it's important to hold things in that spirit of fundamental respect and kindness on a human level as a priority. To not cling to judgements about our own faith or other people's faiths is a good way of following the path of the Buddha.

♦ ♦ ♦

To close these reflections, here are some extracts from a wonderful little booklet by Ajahn Buddhadāsa, entitled *No Religion*. At Ajahn Chah's *kuṭī* in Wat Pah Pong he had a little wicker bench that he used to sit on to receive people. There was only one picture on the wall behind him and it was a picture of Ajahn Buddhadāsa, it sat right above his head. When you were looking at Ajahn Chah, you were looking at Ajahn Buddhadāsa over his head. This is Ajahn Buddhadāsa speaking:

Ordinary, ignorant worldly people are under the impression that there is this religion and that religion, and that these religions are different, so different that they're opposed to each other. Such people speak of 'Christianity', 'Islam', 'Buddhism', 'Hinduism', 'Sikhism', and so on, and consider these religions to be different, separate and incompatible. These people think and speak according to their personal feelings and thus turn the religions into enemies. Because of this mentality, there come to exist different religions which are hostilely opposed to each other.

Those who have penetrated to the essential nature of religion will regard all religions as being the same. Although they may say there is Buddhism, Judaism, Taoism, Islam, or whatever, they will also say that all religions are inwardly the same. However, those who have penetrated to the highest understanding of Dhamma will feel that the thing called 'religion' doesn't exist after all. There is no Buddhism; there is no Christianity; there is no Islam. How can they be the same or in conflict when they don't even exist? It just isn't possible. Thus the phrase 'no religion' is actually Dhamma language of the highest level. Whether it will be understood or not is something else, depending upon the listener, and has nothing to do with the truth or with religion. ...

[O]ne who has attained to the ultimate truth sees that there's no such thing as 'religion'. There is only a certain nature which can be called whatever we like. We can call it 'Dhamma', we can call it 'Truth', we can call it 'God', 'Tao', or whatever we like, but we shouldn't particularize that Dhamma or that Truth as Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, Judaism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, or Islam, for we can neither capture nor confine it with labels or concepts. Still, such divisions occur because people haven't yet realized this nameless truth for themselves.

The Buddha intended for us to understand and be able to see that there is no 'person', that there is no separate individual, and that there are only *dhammas* or natural phenomena. Therefore, we shouldn't cling to the belief that there is this religion and that religion. We added the labels 'Buddhism', 'Islam', and 'Christianity' ourselves, long after the founders lived. None of the great religious teachers ever gave a personal name to their teachings, like we do today. They just went about teaching us how we should live.

Please try to understand this correctly. When the final level is reached, when the ultimate is known, not even humanity exists. There is only nature, only Dhamma. This reality can't be considered to be any particular thing; it can't be anything other than Dhamma. It can't be Thai, Chinese, Indian, Arab or European. It can't be black or brown

or yellow or white or red. It can't be Eastern or Western, Southern or Northern. Nor can it be Buddhist, Christian, Islamic or anything else. So please try to reach this Dhamma, for then you will have reached the heart of all religions and of all things, and finally come to this complete cessation of suffering.

Although we call ourselves 'Buddhists' and profess Buddhism, we haven't yet realized the truth of Buddhism, for we are acquainted with only a tiny aspect of our own Buddhism. Although we are monks, nuns, novices, lay devotees, or whatever, we are aware of only the bark, the outer covering, which makes us think our religion is different from the other religions. Because we fail to understand and haven't yet realized our own truth, we look down upon other religions and praise only our own. We think of ourselves as a special group and of others as outsiders or foreigners. We believe that they are wrong and only we are right, that we are special and have a special calling, and that only we have the truth and the way to salvation. We have many of these blind beliefs. ...

This must be spoken about very often in order to acquaint everyone with the heart of Buddhism: non-attachment. Buddhism is about not trying to seize or grasp anything, to not cling or attach to anything, not even to the religion itself, until finally realizing that there is no Buddhism after all. That means, if we speak directly, that there is no Buddha, no Dhamma, and no Sangha!

However, if we speak in this way, nobody will understand; they will be shocked and frightened, as the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha are the beloved Triple Gem which most Buddhists cherish as the basis of their faith.

Those who understand, see that the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are the same thing, that is, just Dhamma or Nature itself. The compulsion to seize and hang onto things as persons and individuals, as this and that, doesn't exist in them. Everything is non-personal, that is, is Dhamma or Nature in its pure state or whatever we wish to call it. But we do not dare to think like this. We are afraid to think that there is no religion, that there is no Buddha, Dhamma or Sangha. Even if people were taught or forced to think in this way, they still wouldn't be able to understand. In fact, they would have a totally distorted understanding of what they thought and would react in the opposite way to what was intended. (*No Religion*, pp 3-8, Buddhadāsa Foundation, 2020)

As Ajahn Buddhadāsa predicted, sure enough, people complained, 'Ajahn Buddhadāsa is anti-Buddhist, this is wrong view! He shouldn't be talking like that. He can't say there's no Buddhism, we're *Buddhists*! Who does he think he is? He's wrong!' I'm not sure what the Thai for *quod erat demonstrandum* (literally 'which was to be demonstrated', meaning, roughly 'I told you so') is, but Ajahn Buddhadāsa probably had a good way of expressing that, as the critiques came in.

I feel this is a very significant teaching and very helpful indeed in the domain of attachment to religious views. It is also ironic that Ajahn Buddhādāsa was vilified for publishing this teaching, because it is quite in accord with a famous teaching by the Buddha in the *suttas*. In these passages Ajahn Buddhādāsa elucidated brilliantly what the Buddha wished us to do, in his ‘simile of the raft’. This is what the Buddha said:

‘I shall show you, monks, the teaching’s similitude to a raft: as having the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of being clung to. Listen, monks, and heed well.’

‘Yes, Venerable Sir.’

‘Suppose, monks, there is a man journeying on a road and he sees a vast expanse of water of which this shore is perilous and fearful, dangerous, while the other shore is safe and free from danger. But there is no boat for crossing nor is there a bridge going over from this side to the other. So the person thinks, “This is a vast expanse of water; this shore is dangerous and fearful, but the other shore is safe and free from danger. There is no boat here for crossing nor a bridge. Suppose I gather reeds and sticks, branches and leaves, and bind them together into a raft.” That man collects reeds and sticks and branches, binds them together into a raft, and carried by that raft, working with his hands and feet paddling away, he safely crosses over to the other shore. Having crossed

and arrived at the other shore, he thinks, “This raft has been very helpful to me. Carried by it, working with my hands and feet paddling across, I got safely over to this other shore. Now I will lift this raft up on my head, carry it around on my shoulders, and go wherever I want to.”

‘What do you think, monks, will this man, by acting thus, do what should be done with the raft?’

‘No, Venerable Sir.’

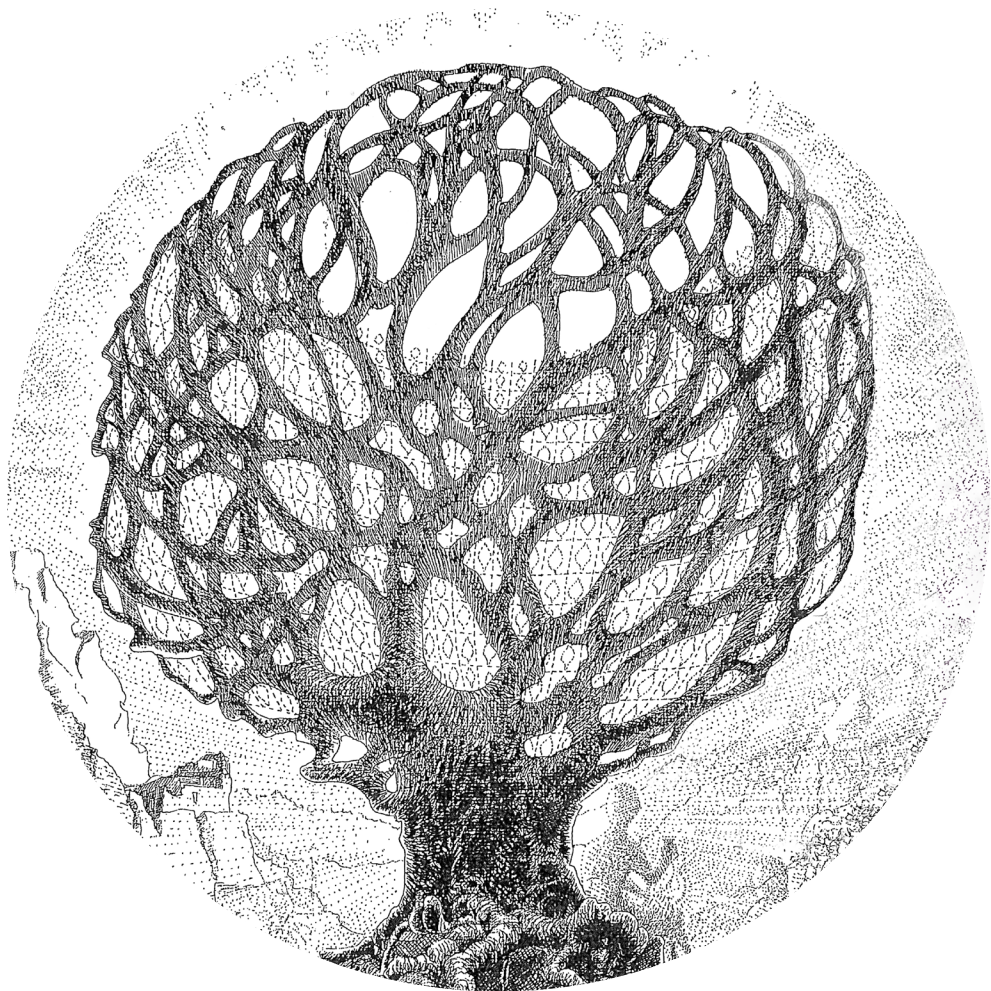
‘How then, monks, would he be doing what ought to be done with the raft? Here, having got across and safely arrived at the other shore, the man thinks, “This raft indeed has been very helpful to me. Carried by it, working with my hands and feet paddling across, I came safely to this other shore. Why don’t I now pull it up onto the bank or let it float away in the water, and then go about as I please?”

‘By acting thus, monks, that man would be doing what should be done with the raft. In the same way, monks, have I shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft: being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of being clung to.

‘Monks, when you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even wholesome states, how much more so unwholesome states.’

(M 22.13-4)

In short, ‘the best religion’ is ‘the raft’ that helps us get across to that safe shore, whether we happen to use the forms of a Christian, a Muslim or a Buddhist, or a scientific materialist, or an agnostic Buddhist. Whatever your faith is, this is what you use. If it is related to in a skilful way, free of attachment to views, *diṭṭhupādāna*, it will get us to that safe further shore. Once we have got to the safe shore, we don’t need to carry our raft around any more. It has served its purpose. On this safe shore it’s a pointless burden. Let go of the raft, as the Buddha wisely advised.



‘Not my Circus, Not my Monkeys’

There is an old Polish saying, ‘Not my circus, not my monkeys’. This is a proverb that I learned a while ago when I was leading a retreat at Amaravati. I was quoting a teaching of Ajahn Chah, and also referring to a painting that hangs in the shrine room of the Retreat Centre.

This is a passage from one of Luang Por Chah’s talks, it’s called ‘Still, Flowing Water’:

The so-called hindrances are the things we must study. Whenever we sit, the mind immediately goes running off. We follow it and try to bring it back and observe it once more. Then it goes off again. This is what you’re supposed to be studying! Most people refuse to learn their lessons from nature – like a naughty schoolboy who refuses to do his homework. They don’t want to see the mind changing. But then how are you going to develop wisdom? We have to live with change like this. When we know that the mind is just this way, constantly changing, when we know that this is its nature, we will understand it.

Suppose you have a pet monkey. Monkeys don’t stay still for long. They like to jump around and grab things. That’s how monkeys are. Now you

come to the monastery and you see a monkey here. This monkey doesn't stay still either, it jumps around just like your pet monkey at home. But it doesn't bother you, does it? You've raised a monkey before, so you know what they're like. If you know just one monkey, no matter where you go, no matter how many monkeys you see, you won't be bothered by them, will you? That's because you are one who understands monkeys.

If we understand monkeys then we won't become a monkey. If you don't understand monkeys, you may become a monkey yourself! Do you understand? If you see it reaching for this and that and you shout, 'Hey, stop!' and you get angry – 'That damned monkey!' – then you're one who doesn't know monkeys. One who knows monkeys sees that the monkey at home and the monkey in the monastery are just the same. Why should you get annoyed by them? When you see what monkeys are like, that's enough; you can be at peace.

What Ajahn Chah is talking about is how, when we want to meditate, we might think, 'If I'm meditating well my mind will be completely peaceful and calm, filled with wholesome and noble qualities, it won't get restless or distracted.' The point he's making is that it is the mind's nature to be distracted, to chase after things that we remember, things that we see, things that we smell and taste and touch, things that we hear. That's its nature. If you want the mind to be different from that, then you've got

the wrong kind of mind. You're in the wrong universe. That's what minds are like. That's their nature. So rather than meditating with the expectation that the mind will be calm and quiet, Ajahn Chah talks about acknowledging that it's a monkey, so it behaves like a monkey. If you don't expect your mind to be different from 'monkey-mind', then you won't suffer. If you accept 'that's what monkeys are like', then your mind will be easier for you to work with and learn from, and ironically it's just that kind of acceptance and attunement to nature that is most helpful in enabling the mind to be peaceful.

In the shrine room at the Amaravati Retreat Centre there's a very fine painting of a Khmer-style Buddha image, and sitting in the lap of the Buddha is a langur monkey – one of the largest monkeys you find in India and Sri Lanka. They have a very dignified nature. They're not like the rhesus macaque *bandar*, which are the bandits and hooligans of the monkey world. Langurs are far more dignified, they have an upright posture and an exceptionally long tail. I was using the example of Ajahn Chah's teaching and also this monkey in relation to the Buddha image – how in the presence of wisdom the mind is still a monkey, but it's a monkey that is far more composed than usual.

One of the people on the retreat came from a Polish background. After hearing my talk he said, 'Did you know, Ajahn, there's an old Polish proverb

about monkeys?’ and I said, ‘No, I’ve never heard of it.’ He said, ‘It says: “Not my circus, not my monkeys”.’ I was immediately struck by this: ‘What a profound, insightful saying!’ Because this proverb is not just talking about the character of monkeys in the same way that Ajahn Chah talked about our mind states, but is also talking about the world, the way we relate to the different aspects of our lives and how we get caught up in things.

I don’t know if your mind is anything like mine, but I find that my character is one where, when I hear a piece of news or am in a conversation with someone, I immediately get absorbed in the issue discussed. I get concerned with the people involved. When watching a film or a TV programme do you get wrapped up in the lives of the characters? Even though there isn’t an Albert Square in London, the most popular TV programme every week remains *EastEnders*. Those people don’t exist – they are actors following scripts. But their imaginary lives in Albert Square are more important to many people than their own lives.

This is how we are. We very easily get wrapped up in other people’s lives, in other people’s concerns. Many years ago I was lighting a fire in a wood-burning stove and had some newspaper to start it with. As can happen when you are living in a place where there’s not much reading matter, you start to notice the news stories in the old newspapers. This newspaper was three or four years old, there was an article in it about a goalkeeper in a football

game who had made a stupid mistake, had let in a goal and the team had lost on account of that. This was a real disaster for them.

Now I didn't really care about football at all – I was a Buddhist monk lighting a fire to warm up a cold room – and yet there I was completely absorbed in this goalkeeper's life, 'Oh no, what a tragedy! How terrible, how awful!' and I was suffering on account of this dreadful mistake that the goalkeeper had made. He had probably forgotten it by then – three or four years later I suspect it was no longer an issue for him. But there was *I*, a Buddhist monk just using a piece of newspaper to start a fire with, and there was this deep worry overwhelming me. My mind identified with the story. This is making the monkeys ours: 'It's *my* circus, and *my* monkeys. I'm wrapped up in this, I'm completely identified with this.' Even though, on the one hand, you might say, 'I don't really care about football. I don't even know the teams or who won or who lost.' Yet there is this ingrained habit of identification, this eagerness to get absorbed into something, 'Oh dear, what a terrible disaster! What an awful thing!'

If we don't understand this process we find ourselves being caught up in, and suffering from, every story we come across: in the family and in the workplace; in the news, or in the realms of fiction. The fictional worlds of Anthony Trollope, or the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or Albert Square, Emmerdale Farm and Coronation Street – these places exist in the minds of

their creators – and the millions of people who watch the TV programs and films or who read the books. When we are not familiar with how our mind works, we continually identify with, grasp and own the many different aspects of our experience.

Now that we are in what they call ‘the information age’, it’s not just hearing a story over the counter of the local shop, chatting with your cousin, reading an occasional novel or watching ten minutes of news once a day. Most of us are now inundated and overwhelmed with information. We have an extraordinary amount of news about every country on the planet coming to us all day and all night, relentlessly. I have often quoted a statistic I read about a couple of years ago. The well known novelist Neil Gaiman gave a talk in London in 2013 to encourage child literacy. He said that he had been talking with one of the seniormost people from Google. And he reported that this person, one of Google’s vice-presidents had said, ‘Between the dawn of civilization, when we first began to create images to depict events and the written word, about ten thousand years ago, up to 2003, humanity created roughly five exabytes of information. That’s five billion gigabytes of information. That is every cuneiform scroll, every scripture, every newspaper, every novel, every poem, every letter, every play that was composed in every country around the world. So about five billion gigabytes of information were created between 10,000 BCE and 2003,

when the information age really kicked off. But now we create the same amount of information *every two days*.’

Neil Gaiman’s talk was given in 2013, so it’s probably that much in about an hour by now, in 2024, because of the speed at which digital information is increasing. Back in 1984, Bill Gates had said, ‘I can’t conceive of a time when any personal computer would ever need more than 32 kilobytes of memory.’ Those of you who are familiar with computers will know that 32 kilobytes is less than three blank Word documents, while a digital photograph is three or four megabytes as a matter of course these days. We are inundated with information, overwhelmed with news. This has a profound impact on us.

We find ourselves in a place where it is very much our circus and these are all our monkeys, and they are behaving as monkeys do. Their world jumps around and it is chaotic and confusing, and therefore stressful because of the sense of entanglement and possessiveness that we have. We don’t just hear the information but it becomes ours, it becomes who we are, and through this identification we create stress, pressure and fragmentation in our lives.

♦ ♦ ♦

A lot of this revolves around the way the mind works with any kind of perception or thought. One very important aspect of Dhamma practice is in relation to what the Buddha called *papañca*, or ‘conceptual proliferation’.

The mind has not just a single thought, but one thought leading on to a second thought, a third, fourth, fifth, sixth – a whole chain of associative thinking – we easily get lost in our thoughts. The most comprehensive teaching that the Buddha gave about *papañca* is in the ‘Middle Length Discourses’ (M 18). It is called the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* – ‘The Discourse on the Sweet Morsel’ or ‘The Honeyball’.

The *sutta* begins with the Buddha sitting by himself in the forest under a tree. And as he is sitting in the forest, a brahmin comes wandering through it. This brahmin was a professional debater called Daṇḍapāṇi who was quite proud of himself – he thought he was really something pretty hot, very skilled and accomplished. He had heard of the Buddha’s reputation, and there he was sitting under a tree. Daṇḍapāṇi thought, ‘Aha! There’s that monk Gotama. He’s supposed to be very wise. I’ll ask him a question and hear what he has to say. Then I’ll find fault with his philosophy, take it to pieces and show him what a real spiritual teacher is like.’ So he came up to the Buddha and introduced himself and said, ‘What kind of practice do you do? What kind of philosophy do you teach? What views do you adhere to?’

Not only did the Buddha have psychic powers, but he was also an accomplished judge of character. He sussed out where this brahmin was coming from, right at the very beginning. So the Buddha said, ‘I follow a teaching that encourages non-contention with anybody in the world.’ So

the brahmin Daṇḍapāṇi realized he had nothing to say, no way of following that. He had been looking for an argument but the Buddha was saying, ‘I follow the path of non-contention. You’re looking for an argument but I’m not going to argue with you.’ So Daṇḍapāṇi clicked his tongue three times, his brow formed into three furrows and he went off shaking his head, leaving the Buddha alone.

The Buddha went back to the monastery and recounted this incident to his community. He said, ‘It is through attachment to thinking that we create the causes for every kind of argument, every kind of struggle and conflict. This is the reason why people pick up weapons and attack each other. It is due to attachment to perceptions and thoughts that the world does this.’ And then the Buddha left them. He had not said very much, so the bhikkhus thought, ‘It would be good to learn more about what he meant there and how this works, let’s go and find Mahā Kaccāna because he’s the best at explaining things that the Buddha has said very briefly.’ So they tracked down Mahā Kaccāna and said, ‘The Master had an encounter with a brahmin in the woods, and he made this very brief statement about how it is our attachment to perceptions and thoughts that causes all the arguments and struggles in the world. Then he left us and went into his *kuṭī*. Can you please explain what he meant? Can you fill that out for us?’

It was thus that Mahā Kaccāna came to be the one to explain in detail the process of conceptual proliferation. He said, ‘It works like this: the eye contacts a visual form. We see something. There is the eye, there is a visual object and eye-consciousness arises. The three coming together is ‘sense contact’. Then that sense contact gives rise to a feeling: a pleasant feeling, a painful feeling or a neutral feeling. Then that feeling, *vedanā*, conditions and causes a perception, *saññā*, so that the mind receives that sense impression. Following immediately on that sense impression, the thinking mind steps in and names it.’

If you are sitting in a room, look at the wall across from you, if you are outside, look at the sky. The eye receives light from that object, the neural impulse hits the visual cortex of the brain, the brain perceives a particular patterning it labels a certain colour, and then the thinking mind, *vitakka*, comes in and says ‘red’ or ‘white’ or whatever. That’s a ‘red’ colour. The sense perception, *saññā*, is the actual perception and then the thought, *vitakka*, is the naming of it. Following immediately from thought, *vitakka*, there is conceptual proliferation. Along with that thought of ‘red’, I might think, ‘There’s actually three kinds of red there on that wall...’.

If I ponder the west wall of the old *sālā* at Amaravati, it might go like this: ‘Red... There’s actually three kinds of red there... I remember when they first did the redecoration... it was in 1991. It was during the winter retreat

in '91, that's right... Ajahn Sumedho did the redecoration of the *sālā* and I was down at Chithurst. I was leading that retreat with Kittisāro, he was a monk then. That was a really great retreat...'. This is *papañca*, conceptual proliferation, one thought leading on to another.

The mind takes a particular impression or thought, and this starts off a whole story. Suddenly, just from seeing a red wall, the mind picks up, 'When that wall was painted, it was 1991. That is over 30 years ago already – when that wall was painted I was down at Chithurst...'. So the story of a different time and a different place from thirty years ago, pops into my mind and off it goes. *Papañca* then leads to what is called *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* – this translates as 'the multiplicity, the diversity, of perceptions and feelings that pressurise the heart'. In simple terms this means that the more the mind gets lost in its own thinking, the more there is a *me* here and *the world* out there': 'Me here and that future that's awaiting me, and that I don't know what's going to happen in.' The further down the track the mind goes, the more there is a sense of 'me here, the world out there' and the pressure, the tension between the two. Mahā Kaccāna goes on to say how it is on account of this capacity of the mind to get lost in its own thoughts, its own creations and proliferations, that we end up in a sense of struggle and conflict between ourselves and others, taking up weapons and getting into 'quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice and false speech.'

One of the reasons for such clashing is that the world that I get lost in is not the same as the world that you get lost in. We have a great deal of conflict and division in the world these days, and that conflict is coming largely because one person's belief system doesn't match another person's belief system. One person's left is another person's right, depending on the viewpoint; that red wall is 'Great!' to one person and 'Ghastly!' to another – different world views, different perceptions, different senses of what's right, what's wrong, what's true, what's not true. If my truth doesn't match your truth, then it's very easy for us to have a conflict.

Mahā Kaccāna had explained all of this and, when the Buddha reappeared some time later, they repeated his elucidation back to him, 'This is what Venerable Mahā Kaccāna said when he was explaining your brief statement.' The Buddha said, 'Mahā Kaccāna is wise, has explained it exactly as I would have done, that's precisely what I meant.' Then Ānanda said, 'This is a wonderful teaching! Just as if someone exhausted by hunger and weakness came across a ball of honey (*madhupiṇḍa*) and it would be sweet and delectable, revitalizing them; so too anyone reflecting on this teaching would be revitalized with satisfaction and confidence of mind. What should we call this discourse?' The Buddha replied, 'You can call it "The Honeyball Discourse".' So from that time to the present day it has been known as 'The Sweet Morsel' or 'The Honeyball'.

This might come across as a bit theoretical, but I suspect that everyone reading this knows from direct experience this process whereby the mind gets taken up with a thought. You see somebody sitting across the aisle in the bus, you hear a snatch of music, or you get a message from someone, or you see a comment in a newspaper, or see the bend of the hills in a landscape... and off the mind goes. We see an image and it triggers feelings in the heart, and because of the mind getting lost in its own creations, getting caught up in the streams of conceptual proliferation (*papañca*), we find ourselves in a stressed and anxious state. We have assumed ownership of both the circus and the monkeys and are caught up in the intense, agitated, out of control feeling that goes with this sense of identity.

But when we challenge ourselves and try to deal with *papañca*, this principle of ‘not my circus, not my monkeys’ comes into play. If we watch our mind and look to see what it is actually doing, we realize, ‘Hang on a minute, I’m just seeing a person on the other side of the bus. I don’t know who they are. I don’t know what their life story is. And yet I was thinking, “That person could become my life partner, that’s the one, my one true love, at last!” or “That person looks dangerous!” or “That person disapproves of me.”’ Instead of buying into our conditioned judgements and incessantly creating stories, we can reflect, ‘Why do I think this? It’s just somebody sitting on the bus. Maybe they’re looking at me thinking, “I don’t like that

person. He's dangerous. He doesn't like me." We can bring into play our capacity to reflect and watch our proliferating mind.



There are different ways of handling conceptual proliferation. One is to just clarify what it is that you are afraid of, or irritated by, or excited about, or conjuring into being and believing in.

There is a story about Ajahn Lee, who became one of the great meditation masters of Thailand, sitting and meditating in his *kuṭī* one day when he was a young monk. As I recall, it went something like this: he hears the sound of the rain on his roof, then he thinks, 'The Rains Retreat will be over soon,' then, 'I've done my five Rains as a monk now, it will be in accordance with custom for me to disrobe,' then, 'That girl from my village said she'd wait... maybe she's ready to get married.' He imagines getting married, and then they have a couple of children, and then he's on the farm and she's working in a local match factory close to the village. Then he thinks, 'Those places are pretty dangerous, what if there is a fire in the factory and she's injured... Oh no, if she's hurt and I can't afford the medical bills... And who's going to take care of the children?' He has worked himself into quite an anxious state about all this terrible stuff that has just happened to his wife, and about who is going to look after his kids, but then he realizes, 'Wait,

wait, wait, wait! I'm in my *kuṭī*, I'm still a monk. None of this has happened!' It is a great relief and a smile comes to his face.

That recognition of, 'Wait a minute, none of this has happened, that world has not come into being – it's all a fiction – I'm still here in my regular life,' is a reflection we can all use to our benefit. Just as, if you are getting completely absorbed in the fictional events of *Hamlet* or *EastEnders* or *Game of Thrones* we can reflect, 'Those people don't really exist, these are actors. What I'm seeing on the screen is because a group of people sat down and wrote a script together. This is invented. These are not real people. I don't have to be losing sleep over what's going to happen to Laertes or Phil Mitchell or Sansa Stark.'

Another way that we can recognize the fabricated, false nature of what we are thinking is to inflate the content of the thought stream. This is a method Ajahn Sumedho has often advocated over the years. Say, for example, that the mind comes up with a thought such as, 'She's a really interesting person,' or 'He is a monster,' or 'Who'll look after the monastery when the Ajahn dies?' When these kinds of judgements or questions are noticed, we can consciously, mindfully, pick them up and follow them through, and inflate them by saying, 'Maybe it's not just him that dies, maybe all the senior monks will die, and all the senior nuns too. I'm only an anagārika, but maybe all the monks and nuns will die and I'll be left in charge of Amaravati, and then... what?' Again, a smile of relief will come

to our face, because this wise reflection has shown us the absurdity of our habitual conceptual proliferations.

When we find our mind getting lost in thoughts about the conflicts and tensions we have with others, we can consider, ‘If all the people who don’t like me died, then only people who like me would be alive. And that would be good, wouldn’t it?’ When we do that, and if we follow it through to its logical conclusion, we will find we can’t even get to the end of the sentence. It becomes ridiculous, meaningless and falls apart on its own. ‘I think only people who like me deserve to live. Anybody who doesn’t like me should just drop dead. I only want people who like me to be alive, because people shouldn’t dislike me – that’s bad of them!’ This is ridiculous, what a crazy mind!

It takes a bit of mindfulness to do this exercise, though. There needs to be a deliberate effort to catch the mind as it wildly proliferates, but if you do it, you will begin to see things in a different way. Say you are sitting meditating and then you’re getting annoyed with the traffic in the street. You think, ‘Bloody traffic... I can’t meditate because of all that noise!’ We need to mindfully catch that thought and then follow it through to its logical conclusion, ‘If that noise wasn’t there, I would be perfectly enlightened.’ Er, unlikely. ‘If that noise was not there, then I would be totally happy,’ again, not likely. ‘That noise is there because the world is populated by

malicious people who are spending their time deliberately interrupting my meditation.’ No. Often it only takes a small effort to catch our thought and follow it through – it’s a small effort but it’s a specific effort, like putting the right key into a lock – and then its own absurdity makes the habitual thought-pattern fall apart. If our thought-habits are not clearly seen, they are like things off at the edges of our vision – you don’t know what they are, so they have power and influence. If you get them front and centre, and say, ‘Talk to me,’ then they lose their power.

Another useful method, when you find yourself completely lost in thoughts, is to follow the train of thought back to its source. Say you are, in your imagination, busy divorcing your current spouse and getting married to this person on the bus, or you are in a monastery and you are imagining getting out of the monastery, or you are outside the monastery imagining getting into the monastery: ‘How would I look with a shaved head? I don’t know about losing my eyebrows, but the rest is really appealing...’. So that lost-in-thought-ness is noticed and you say to yourself, ‘Wait a minute, wait a minute... Where did this begin? Well, it began with me seeing the back of that monk’s head and then there was a thought, “I’m very attached to my hair but it’s falling out. Monks shave their heads all the time. If I shaved my head regularly, I wouldn’t have to worry about my hair loss problem.” That’s how I got into this idea of “Maybe I should go into the monastery.”’

If you follow your thinking back to its initial perception, like me thinking, ‘There’s red paint on the western wall of the *sālā*,’ you realize it is just a red colour, but it drew the mind back to that memory of 1991. Or it is just that you saw the back of that monk’s head. It was *just seeing*. It was *just a sound*. It was *just a feeling*. If you trace it back to where it came from, the mind recognizes, ‘It was *just seeing* somebody on the bus. It was just the colour of a wall. It was just a sound I heard in the kitchen. It was just an aroma that I smelled. *That was all* – just a brief wave of feeling. Nothing more happened.’ Very simple.

What we find is that the further we go back to the source, to the initial perception, the simpler it gets. The further you get into the story, the more there is ‘*me here*’, ‘*the world there*’, and the tension between the two. If you follow it back to its origin, there is just hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, that is all. It is extraordinarily simple and there is no sense of self involved either.

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When we find ourselves getting lost in alienated thoughts: ‘Why don’t people like me? Why do people give me a hard time? Life would be so much better if everyone liked me and was nice to me...’ we can reflect that we are creating unrealistic expectations. This is rather like Ajahn Chah pointing out that the nature of monkeys is to jump around and play. That’s what they do. The nature of people is that some people like you,

some don't like you, and a lot are completely indifferent to you. Many people don't even notice you. This observation might not be pleasing to the childish, self-centred habits of our mind but the intuitive wisdom of the *citta* will realize, 'Of course.'

I was struck by this statement, 'Not my circus, not my monkeys' because of that old habit of mine, of identifying with things and taking them personally. It was much stronger in years gone by and, thankfully, it's a lot weaker now. As I explored this saying and reflected on it, I realized that it's a very profound expression of the principle of *anattā* – not-self. This is how the world is. The world is a circus – it is comprised of a lot of activity and colour, movement and sound – but it's not *my* circus. I don't have to own it or identify with it. I don't have to be possessive about it. I don't have to create a sense of false responsibility in relation to it. And what people feel, about me or anything, is not under my control. I might want everyone to be happy. I might want everyone to like me. I might want nobody to ever, ever suffer in any way, but I can't control that. That is not under my control. We are not the owners of the world. We often don't realize that we are creating a tremendous amount of tension and suffering in ourselves because we relate to other people as if we owned them, as if they belonged to us and we were in control of them.

When it is spelled out like this it is blatantly farcical, yet it's a farce that we mysteriously buy into and take to be real.



Another aspect of our thoughts and proliferations is that, even though we might think, 'Not my circus, not my monkeys; this particular issue is not my problem,' the world often demands that we have an opinion. I lived in the USA for a long time. Having opinions is quite a strong thing here in the UK but it is even stronger in America where it's almost socially unacceptable not to have an opinion about things. People would ask, 'What do you think about George Bush, Ajahn?' I would reply, 'I don't think about George Bush, at least very little.' 'But you must have an opinion, Ajahn! What's your opinion?' People would be quite shocked or feel almost insulted if you said, 'I don't have an opinion.' 'How can you not have an opinion?!' Culturally it's almost an obligation. Over here in the UK too, how many conversations start in the workplace or in the home, while watching something on television, or talking about something in the office with your colleagues, and they ask, 'So, what do you think about Boris Johnson?' You *can* say, 'I don't think about Boris Johnson,' if that's true, of course.

This readiness, this mindfulness, to stop, to not buy into the coaxing of the moment, is valuable in terms of developing insight into not-self (*anattā*), and using this principle as a way of helping us to be more peaceful and

spacious. When someone asks, ‘What’s your opinion?’ or ‘What do you feel about...?’ Be honest. If you don’t have an opinion, don’t feel like you have to come up with one just to make conversation. Sometimes people will say something or ask you about this or that and they don’t really care – it’s just to make conversation. They say, ‘What do you think about such and such?’ They don’t care what you think about such and such. They just want to interact with you.

Over and over again, in the past, I found that someone would ask me a question, ‘What do you think about such and such?’ Then I would say something, just to be polite, and then they would immediately counter with, ‘I don’t really think that is true, I think you have got to look at both sides of it.’ Five minutes into it you realize, ‘Hang on a moment, I didn’t really have any interest in this in the first place and now I’m finding myself in opposition to this other person. How did we get here?’ You might also have noticed another interesting phenomenon, whereby somebody is so keen to engage that, even if you agree with them, ‘Actually, I think you are right,’ they keep arguing with you, and then they change round to the opposite side, contradicting what they said half an hour before. The impetus is solely to feel like someone, through engaging with another, and that sense of selfhood is fed by pushing against someone else; the content of the discussion is largely irrelevant.

Oftentimes we are simply keen to be with each other and we need an excuse, a way of speaking with each other, just to be able to spend time together – silence is not easy for most people. But we can find ourselves getting caught up in opinions, taking positions and getting fully involved with the circus and the monkeys when we really don't need to. So, I would encourage, when people ask you for an opinion or to speak about something, to consider 'Do I *really* care about this? Do I think about this very much? Do I have something that is useful to say or not?' I would encourage you to consider that it is completely acceptable to say, 'I don't have an opinion,' or, 'I don't think about Boris Johnson.' It's not as though one is disconnected from society. We are still living as part of the human family, but if things are not particularly your concern or your interest, or you are not particularly involved, it's quite OK to say, 'I haven't thought about it very much,' or, 'I don't have an opinion.' And that in itself can start an interesting conversation.

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On the subject of control, we suffer a lot because we somehow feel that we are supposed to be in control. Particularly if you're a parent and you're supposed to be in control of your children. Or you're a school teacher and you're supposed to be in control of your class. Or you're in a hospital or you're running a department and you're supposed to be in charge of these people. Or you're an abbot and you're supposed to be in charge of Amaravati

monastery. Even when we are not in a formal position of leadership, somehow we seem to feel that we are supposed to understand everybody and are supposed to know everything that is going on; that, somehow, we have mastered everything and we're in control here. 'I've got this covered. I know what's going on.' But often we don't really. We don't really know what is going on. We don't fully know how things will work out. We are, most certainly, not in control.

On account of this simple attribute of the natural order – *anicca vata saṅkhārā*, 'all things are uncertain and transient' – we create stress and distress in our hearts. How? Because, although we don't really understand how things work, we feel that we should. Or we think that 'they' assume that we know everything, so we need to keep up the pretence to impress the mysterious and ubiquitous 'them'. But we don't know where things are going to go. We don't know what all of the people are feeling and thinking – and the unnecessary, absurd belief that we should, is what creates the *dukkha*.

In the past I saw myself doing this very often. I was a compulsive explainer. I always wanted to have everything sorted and clarified, with lists of how everything was working. It has taken a lot of effort in my Dhamma practice to not always try to explain everything, to not have everything perfectly organized and predictable, or not to be feeling like I understand where people are at, but rather just to leave things alone and acknowledge, 'I don't

know what's going on here. I don't know how this works. I don't know what people are feeling.'

Whenever I brought this reflection, with its resultant change of view to mind, I'd notice an immediate sense of relief. It is a false sense of control that we try to bring into being. Because we are never really in charge. We don't really understand everything, but because we feel that we are supposed to do so, we feel a sense of lack, inability or anxiety. If, instead, we reflect on *aniccatā*, uncertainty, then we realize, 'Of course it's uncertain, of course there's the unknown. It has always been this way.' When we acknowledge uncertainty and that things are not under our control – because these are monkeys, and no one knows what the monkeys are going to do next – then we are not creating that false sense of, 'I'm in charge here. I know what's going on. I know how this works. I know the right way to go.' As Ajahn Chah said, we are much more at ease if we let the monkeys be the way they are. 'If you understand monkeys, you won't become a monkey!'

Many years ago, I was looking at this issue very directly because I was such a worrier. I was always worrying about life and about what was going to happen next and about how things were and what people were feeling. So I made a specific practice of watching that worried feeling, that sense of identifying with the circus, of making it mine, and instead of identifying with my deep-seated anxiety, I consciously looked at the feeling of tension whenever it came up within me.

I was living here at Amaravati from '85 to '95. For about two or three years during that period I would begin each day, at the morning meditation, by saying to myself, 'Whenever I have a feeling of anxiety or worry about anything – whether it has a real basis or whether it is just my imagination – a worry about what someone is thinking or feeling, or a worry about what is going to happen next – whatever the object of my worry is, I now set the intention to notice that feeling of worry, to turn my attention around and recognize that worry, that sense of tightness in the body.' This worry would often feel like a knot of tension in the stomach, the belly. Then, whenever I noticed that tightening in the body, I consciously relaxed there, relaxed the muscles of the body, relaxed the stomach and let the body be at ease. When my body was at ease, I was able to fully appreciate what it was like for the body to be free of tension, free of that stress.

The next part of this exercise was very interesting: 'At that moment when the body is completely relaxed, I should ask, "What was it that I was worrying about?"' Repeatedly I would find that, for two or three seconds, there would be a hiatus, a gap, a silence. 'It was... What was it?' I couldn't find what the source of the worry was. Then, 'Oh yes, that was it!' I could reconstitute it, but for a moment there was nothing there, nothing to be worried about. There was no object. This supported the insight, the realization, that the anxious feeling was nothing to do with the world being wrong; it was to

do with how my mind related to the world – that is where the ‘wrongness’ was coming from. I followed that practice for two or three years; I made that the main focus of my spiritual life and it had a big effect on me. A very beneficial effect.

During this period, there was a little reflection I would use, ‘Just do what you do and let the world make of it what it will.’ In other words, don’t be afraid or don’t try to find happiness through getting approval from everybody about what you do. Because I found that my mind was dominated by wanting to please everybody all the time and being afraid of being disliked or disapproved of, it was a challenge to drop this habit. First, when I said that phrase to myself, I could feel this little voice in me going ‘But they might not like it! They might be unhappy!’ That made me realize, ‘You’re right on the mark here. This is exactly what needs to be looked at.’ After doing that for two or three years, I found a tremendous ease. I was just letting the monkeys be monkeys, letting the world be the way it is. This is not a matter of being careless or indifferent or numb, but having a relaxed attitude – a way of letting go of that false sense of control. Letting go of the fear that the world needs you to be worrying about it in order for it to hold together.

During this time I was becoming a lot more relaxed in my attitude with respect to the way that I did things and related to life at Amaravati. One day,

Ajahn Saṃvaro, another monk who was living here, made the comment, ‘You’re a lot easier to live with since you stopped trying to be perfect.’ I wasn’t sure whether to be insulted or feel complimented and encouraged! But it was a helpful remark because it came from a kind and sincere place. So all my trying to get it right and to please everybody had actually been creating a cloud of tension. Once I was a bit more relaxed, that was a much more helpful thing to offer to the world.

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One of the interesting things about fear is that when we are afraid of something, our attention goes to the thing that we’re afraid of, we don’t pay attention to the experience of fear itself. I began to use fear as a meditation object because the more frightening something is, the more our attention fixates on the thing we are afraid of, so we don’t notice the feeling of fear itself as an experience. We’re attending to *that thing*, the object – whether it is a memory or a possible future or someone’s attitude or a world event – and we don’t notice what is happening on this side, with us, the subject.

We spend a lot of energy and time getting away from the feeling of fear, getting to a place where we can feel comfortable and secure. So you’d think fear must be a terrible, awful, painful thing for us to spend so much time and effort trying to get away from it. What was very interesting to notice, when I first started to use this practice of exploring what the sensation of

fear was like in my body, was the realization, ‘Yes, it’s painful but it’s not that bad; it’s not even as uncomfortable as a toothache or a stone in my shoe. It is just mildly unpleasant, like a bit of a headache when there’s a thunderstorm brewing. That’s it.’ I was almost disappointed; it was like, ‘Why did I spend so much time trying to get away from this feeling, when it’s really not that much of a problem? It’s not *that* painful or uncomfortable.’ I was quite surprised.

‘This is *it*? What?!’

One of the Upanishads describes how, as soon as there is the ‘I’, there is a ‘self’ and ‘another’ – and because there’s ‘I’ here and ‘the other’ there, then ‘this’ can feel threatened by ‘that’. It is a very simple dynamic. When the ‘I’ is let go of, then, rather than the unknown being threatening, it is still the unknown, but our experience is one of wonderment, of mystery, rather than fearful threat.

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When we use a phrase like ‘not my circus, not my monkeys’ one can interpret this as saying ‘I’m alright, Jack, I’ve got mine. I don’t care about the rest of you, you can just get lost.’ But it’s not that kind of attitude. It’s not about being dismissive or being a sociopath, cutting yourself off from everyone. If we take the Buddhist teaching on the Middle Way to heart, we realize that this is talking about having a balanced attitude, whereby

we are attuned to the people around us but we are not creating a stance of possessiveness or judgementalism towards them.

Most readers are likely to be familiar with the word *dāna* – meaning ‘generosity’. There is another important Pali word, *anādāna*. This means ‘non-possessiveness’ or ‘non-ownership’. *Dāna* is a very important word, but *anādāna*, in terms of wisdom, is even more important, because it expresses the quality of non-ownership, non-identification, non-attachment. ‘This isn’t mine. This circus does not belong to me. This world is not mine. This body is not mine. This monastery is not mine – it doesn’t have an owner.’ So, *anādāna* means non-ownership, non-possessiveness. These are not ‘your’ children. These are not ‘your’ parents. This is not ‘your’ money. This is not ‘your’ property. This is not ‘your’ life. Part of us can be threatened by this concept, because we feel we own ‘my family’, ‘my children’, ‘my reputation’, ‘my money’, ‘my monastery’. It can feel like something that is ours is being taken away, but what *anādāna* is pointing to, in terms of the teaching of the Buddha, is that nothing has ever belonged to us. How could anything *really* have an owner? ‘Ownership’ is just a conventional agreement. I can say ‘This is my copy of *Food for the Heart*. It’s got my name in it, so it’s *mine*. It’s got my notes in it. But one day it might go missing or I might put it down and somebody might pick it up and then it is not mine anymore. It was printed by Wisdom Publications in Boston so before

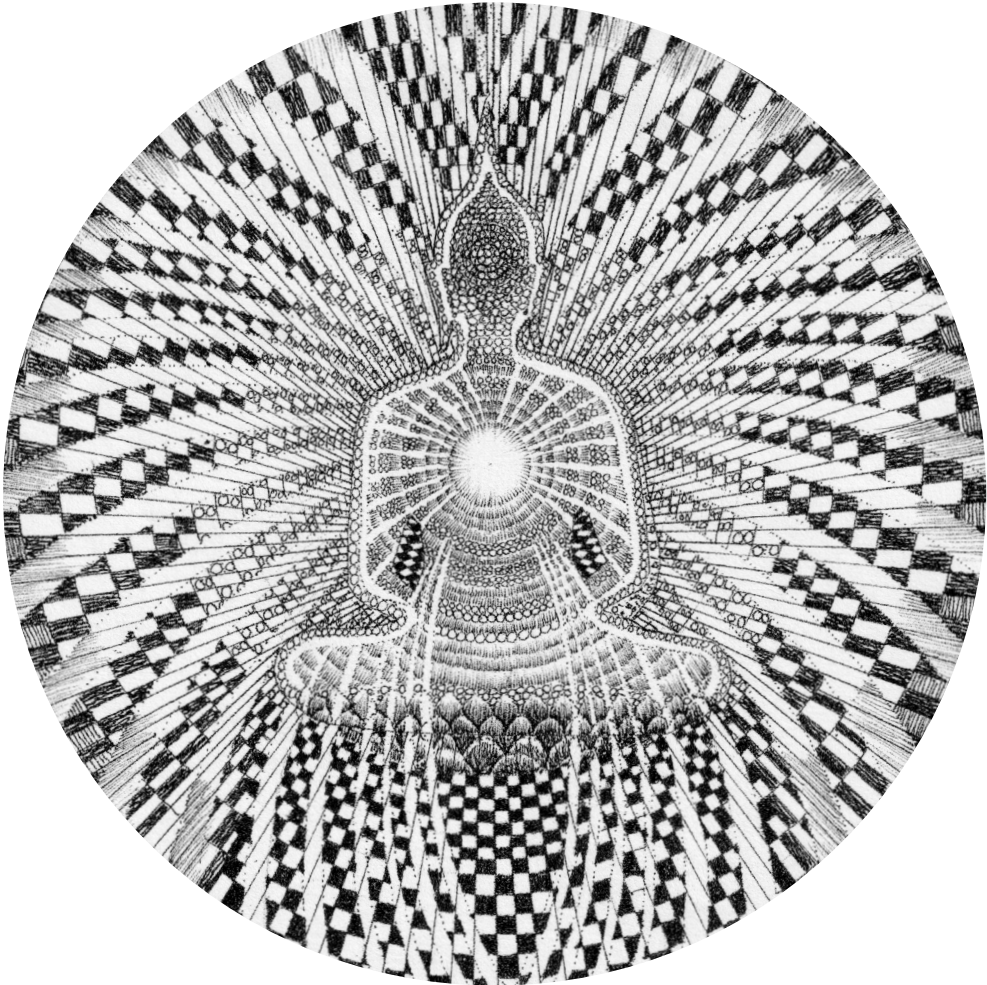
it arrived here in a box it wasn't mine, it belonged to Wisdom Publications; I took this copy out of a box and suddenly 'mine-ness' arose. This 'mine-ness' is always temporary, contingent, it can never be absolute or permanent.

When we reflect wisely on this aspect of our lives, we experience a relaxation of the heart. The world is like this. When we let go of our sense of ownership or our false sense of responsibility for the world, we can take responsible action more effectively. When we are not trying to be in charge or be the owner who is supposed to be looking after everything, when that feeling of possessiveness and identification is let go of, then we find that we are 'much easier to live with, since we stopped trying to be perfect'. We find that we can engage with the world in a far more effective and helpful fashion. This is the embodiment of the Middle Way.

The Middle Way is a mysterious integration of attributes. The Buddha manifested these qualities in *vijjācaraṇa-sampanno* – being 'perfect in knowledge and conduct'. The *vijjā* (knowledge) is the quality of awareness, wisdom, that is based on non-attachment, non-possessiveness. It's the insight, the realization that there is no owner of things and that they have no substance. Things are *suñña*, empty. They are ownerless, *anādāna*. So *vijjā* – wisdom, awareness – has a completely transcendent quality. Yet in that same expression *vijjā* is twinned with *caraṇa*, 'conduct'. The Buddha is not just perfect in wisdom but also perfect in conduct. Using the Christian

theological terminology, wisdom and conduct represent transcendence and immanence. This is the mysterious balance of the Middle Way, there is both apperception of, attunement to, the way things are and a complete non-attachment, non-identification with the way things are. These are two aspects of the same reality – the reality of pure wisdom-awareness.

Thus when we apply this reflection ‘not my circus, not my monkeys’, it is not creating a false separation, dismissal or a numbing of the heart. It is not encouraging us to be sociopaths or uncaring. Rather it is enabling us to let go of our habits of anxiety and ownership so that we can respond more skilfully to life. Ajahn Candasiri offered a coinage to express this: ‘response-ability’, our ability to respond. When we think about the word ‘responsibility’, we might immediately feel tense, ‘It’s *my* responsibility. I’ve got to make all these people happy,’ then this is *my* circus and these are *my* monkeys and we’ve got trouble! But if it is ‘response-ability’ instead, then the heart intuitively responds to the time, the place and the situation with the best that it can offer each moment.



‘Who was Ajahn Chah?’

On the 17th of June, 2018, it was a hundred years after Ajahn Chah’s birth in Bahn Gor, a little village in Ubon Province in North-East Thailand. So who was the Ajahn Chah whose hundredth anniversary was being celebrated on that day? There are a variety of ways one can respond to that question.

The most obvious place to begin is with the story of his life from the most ordinary, historical perspective. This is the first way of describing a person. The village where Luang Por Chah was born was in Warin District, near the city of Ubon Ratchathani. He was one of a large number of children in his family. He was unusual insofar as he chose to go into the monastery on his own initiative at the age of nine. He wasn’t sent there by his parents but they agreed to his move. He left the home life and signed up as a *dek wat*, a temple boy. He stayed in the monastery of his own village for a few years and then received novice ordination, I believe, when he was about eleven or twelve. He trained as a novice until he was sixteen; during that time his teacher in the monastery, Ajahn Lang, was his guide and mentor. The young novice Chah – Nehn Eung was his nickname, *eung* as in ‘bullfrog’, so, Novice Bullfrog was how he was known – Nehn Eung was very impressed that Ajahn Lang would take him regularly to visit the Chuangchots, Nehn

Eung's family, and spend a lot of time teaching his mother and father. He then found out that Ajahn Lang was actually interested in Ajahn Chah's elder sister. To his great surprise, Ajahn Lang disrobed and then proposed to his elder sister. With his Ajahn disrobing and leaving the Sangha, and also being at the restless age of sixteen, he ended up leaving the robes at that time as well.

He took on the lay life for a few years, from when he was sixteen to the age of twenty. During that time he also fell in love with a local girl from the village. Those readers who are familiar with Luang Por Chah's biography will know that that was a difficult situation for him. His best friend was a young lad called Pūht. Pūht had a half-sister called Jai, and it was Jai that the young Chah Chuangchot was in love with. They were assuming that they would get married and live together, and they were beginning to plan a future. Then one day his friend Pūht said, 'I'm sorry, but they're marrying me to the girl.' So Pūht had an arranged marriage to Jai. His best friend and his girlfriend got married together. So that was, as they say, tough! That was hard to take. What better thing to do then than to go back into the monastery? That was the motivation, or the impulse, for him to go back into robes, the suffering of the heartbreak that he had had.

He lived in the village temple. He was very bright so he learned the Buddhist scriptures and some Pali, and became a responsible and respected member

of the local community. But then, after he had been a bhikkhu for about six or seven years, his father fell very ill. It was the slow fading and death of his father that was the impulse for him to take up meditation.

In many of the village and city temples, Sangha members often don't do a lot of meditation. They perform many ceremonies, they study Pali and the Buddhist scriptures, they carry out a lot of pastoral roles, helping people, giving advice, but they don't do a lot of *bhāvanā*, meditation. But with his father fading and dying, the young bhikkhu Chah Subhaddo thought along the lines of, 'I don't know what to do with my mind. I'm feeling sad. I'm upset. I feel powerless. My mind is all over the place even though I'm a monk. We have all these stories about the Buddha and the wise enlightened beings. I'm not wise. My mind is not focused. I have no *samādhi*. I'm all over the place. I need to do something about my mind...'. The death of his father was thus the impulse for him to take up meditation. There was an important dialogue between him and his father, when he was on his deathbed. His father said, 'Please don't disrobe. Promise me that you will stay as a monk.' The young Bhikkhu Chah said, 'Yes, I promise I will not disrobe.' It was about 1945 by this time.

He then took up the life of a wandering forest monk, travelling by foot on *tudong*, and he sought out meditation teachers. He was living in forests as he travelled through the region and he met with a number of different

teachers. There was Luang Pu Kinaree and also Luang Pu Tongrat; these were *Mahānikai* forest monks who had trained with Venerable Ajahn Mun and who were local to the Ubon area. They were the first forest Ajahns that the young Bhikkhu Chah sought out and practised with.

As time went by and he got more and more serious with his practice, a great deal of faith and commitment arose. He made a resolution during this time, because he was so pressured by the feeling of *dukkha*, of suffering. He saw that the teaching of the Buddha, and the way of life of the forest monastics, was a most precious opportunity to understand the mind and to bring suffering to an end. He resolved, 'I'm going to use this life to arrive at the end of suffering. Whatever it takes, I'll do it.' He made this firm *adhiṭṭhāna*, resolution, when he was just a young monk.

That he made that strong commitment to do whatever it takes – 'Whatever I have to do, I'll do it!' – is a well-known part of his history. When he was a child he was always the one who would try hardest, climb the tree the highest, work hardest in the field. He would always, if he was going to do anything, do it 110%. So, if he was going to be a monk, he was going to do that 110% as well.

He committed himself firmly, ardently, to the practice. Then having trained with Luang Pu Tongrat and Luang Pu Kinaree, who were both disciples of Luang Pu Mun, the most well known forest Ajahn – the young

Bhikkhu Chah went to see if he could find Luang Pu Mun. This was in the last years of Luang Pu Mun's life. Ajahn Chah met him at his monastery in Nong Phue in Sakhon Nakhon Province; he only spent three days with Luang Pu Mun. Luang Pu Mun was a *Dhammayut* monk, while Luang Por Chah was from the *Mahānikai*; these are the two different lineages in Thailand. Part of our history as a forest monastic community is the dialogue between these two groups.

As the young Bhikkhu Chah stayed with Luang Pu Mun for those few days, great faith and confidence in Luang Pu Mun's teachings arose in him. He thought, 'This monk is truly enlightened, he definitely knows what he is talking about and I would like to follow his teachings.' He asked Luang Pu Mun, 'Should I let go of my precepts as a *Mahānikai* monk and reordain in the *Dhammayut* lineage?' Luang Pu Mun replied, 'No, you don't need to change lineage. They need good monks in the *Mahānikai* community as well. Please stay where you are.' So that's what he did.

Every evening Luang Pu Mun would give a Dhamma talk and on the third evening he gave a teaching that was to inspire Ajahn Chah's practice ever after. In this final teaching Luang Pu Mun made it very clear that the mind that is aware and the objects of awareness are utterly separate. There is a transcendent (*lokuttara*) quality to that awareness. That which knows the five *khandhas* – the body, the feelings, the perceptions, thoughts and

emotions and sense consciousness – is not part of the five *khandhas*. It is not tied to them. That is why liberation is possible. If all awareness was intrinsically part of the five *khandhas*, liberation would be impossible. Because there is awareness, the *poo roo* or *vijjā*, the quality of knowing, and it is transcendent and separate from the five *khandhas*, therefore liberation is possible. This teaching had a very powerful effect on the young Bhikkhu Chah. He took these teachings to heart as he carried on along his way as a forest monk.

To cut a long story short, four or five years later, in 1953, he began to teach. He initially took on a few students and they had a Rains Retreat together. He instituted a famously vigorous routine. They had all night meditation every night. Every monk and novice had to sit up in meditation all night, every night, for the whole three months. Then for the last month, just to crank it up even more, everyone had to sit up all night and not move. So it was a twelve hour sitting with no moving, every night for a month – this was extraordinarily rigorous! At the end of this retreat a couple of the monks who were with him continued on as his first long-term disciples.

The people from Bahn Gor village, including his mother, heard that he had come back into the area and that he was teaching. His reputation as a good, committed monk had spread and a delegation from Bahn Gor came to find him. They requested, ‘Please, Venerable Sir, we have a forest near

the village, as you know. We would like to invite you to come and live in the Bahn Gor forest. We will support you to start a monastery there.’ Ajahn Chah accepted and that’s how Wat Nong Pah Pong began, in 1954.

* * *

Ajahn Chah had a lot of different meditation techniques that he practised and taught. He was kind of a magician; he could keep pulling rabbits out of his hat. As foundational practices he most often taught mindfulness of breathing, frequently encouraging using the mantra *Buddho*; *bud-* on the inbreath and *-dho* on the outbreath. For walking meditation he advised walking at an ordinary natural pace back and forth on a path about 20-25 metres long. He taught contemplation using reflections on uncertainty. One very simple method was: every time your mind forms a judgement of liking or disliking, ask yourself, ‘Is that so? Is that a sure thing?’

He was a constant innovator of practices. He would suggest things like, as I myself saw him demonstrate, a pocket version of walking meditation. You take something like a glass, you put it down in one spot, time it for a minute, and then move it a foot to another spot. Leave it there for a minute and then move it back. Leave it there for a minute and then move it back to where it first was. Do that for an hour – simply picking up a glass moving it a foot, then putting down and every minute. Along the way, see what your mind does with that process.

With a monk who had a tendency towards anger, he gave him a dish of cold water, ‘Put that in the corner of your *kuṭī* and use it as a meditation object, contemplate water and cooling.’ Sometimes he would describe a meditation method and a person would ask, ‘Luang Por, are you sure that will work for me?’ And he would say, ‘It’s not a sure thing, but try it and see what happens.’ He was like a magician. There was no end to the kind of practices that he could come up with. An interesting one, to work with anger, was, ‘Put aside mindfulness of breathing and make anger your meditation object. Think of something that makes you angry and then keep your attention on that angry feeling. When the anger slips away, bring it back – get angry again! Just like if you were doing mindfulness of breathing. As soon as your attention wanders from the breath you bring it back – in the same way, see if you can stay angry for an hour.’ This is really hard to do (I tried it) because anger only works in short flashes. He pointed out that, by the time you get to the end of the hour, the anger will have disappeared, at least for a substantial time. He was amazingly creative. If you counted the different practices he taught people, you would probably come up with a hundred or so.

Wat Pah Pong began in March 1954. Ajahn Chah stayed there and taught continually. People gathered around, from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and from abroad as the community was established. Ajahn Sumedho was the first Westerner to arrive, in 1967.

Ajahn Chah was always available to give teachings. By the time I arrived at the beginning of 1978, most of every day Luang Por Chah would sit under his *kuṭī* and receive people from after the meal time at about nine o'clock in the morning through until maybe nine o'clock in the evening, maybe ten, maybe midnight. After the lay people had gone, he would stay up until one or two, maybe three o'clock in the morning talking to the monks and novices. Often you would hear the morning bell going at 3 a.m. and he would say, 'Uhh, time to take a rest,' and he would go off and recline for a couple of hours, and then be up and about, in time for *pindapat*, the alms-round, at five or five-thirty in the morning.

He was an incredibly generous teacher, but that endless giving had a significant effect on his body. By the time he was about 63 years old, in 1981, his health started to degenerate significantly. That year he had a stroke or brain lesion, no one is quite sure what happened, while he was spending the Rains Retreat at Wat Tam Saeng Pet, near the town of Amnaht Charoen. Over a period of seven or eight months his health worsened steadily. When he reached the Rains of 1982, at the age of 64, his health had eroded to the point where he couldn't speak, he couldn't walk, he couldn't move, and he was totally paralysed except for some slight movement in one hand. For the last ten years of his life – he lived until 1992 – he was looked after by his disciples and nursed with assiduous care. It was a testimony to the monks

and novices who looked after him that, though bedridden for ten years, he never got a bedsore. He was very well looked after and with great respect and affection. He passed away finally on the 16th January 1992.

That is the story of Luang Por Chah's life. At the time he passed away there were about 50 or 60 branch monasteries, now there are over 340. His teaching has spread greatly since he passed away. We are very grateful that he set things up in a way that was so skilful that, after the great Master died, the influence of his teaching didn't fade but, rather, has steadily increased.



When we consider the question, 'Who was Ajahn Chah?' a biography is one way of approaching it. Another is the story of our own personal experiences.

My first encounter with Ajahn Chah was in January 1978. I was 21 years old. I was a hippy, straight off the beach in Phuket. I had sand in my hair and a spiral seashell hanging from my earring. I didn't like rules, I didn't like any limits. But I was an unhappy hippy and I was looking for some way of working with my mind in a direct way.

I had the idea of myself as being a spiritual person. You know, 'I'm beyond worldly concerns.' I was only 21 but I felt I was more spiritually advanced than the people I was hanging out with at university or in the village where I grew up. I had a high opinion of myself. When I met Ajahn Chah for the

first time, he was building a toilet. I had read a lot of myths and legends, as well as some Carlos Castaneda, so my head was filled with inflated ideas such as, 'Oh, this is very significant. He's building a toilet. The Great Guru, the Holy Master is very down to earth. This is definitely symbolic, laden with all kinds of meaning.' He had a cement trowel in his hand and he was smoothing the surround of this new toilet block. Because I'd read those spiritual books and ancient tales (although no Buddhist ones) I thought, 'He'll see me and say something like, "Oh, you've come at last. I have been waiting for you!"' There was a story I heard later: when the young Bhikkhu Chah arrived at Luang Pu Tongrat's monastery, when Luang Pu Tongrat saw him walking through the gate he said, 'Ah, Chah. You've arrived.' And that was the first time they had ever met. There was no way that Ajahn Tongrat could have known Ajahn Chah's name through ordinary means, but as soon as he walked in the gate, Ajahn Tongrat said, 'Ah, Chah. You've arrived.' The 21-year-old me thought I was going to get one of these welcomes, but I didn't.

Ajahn Pabhakaro was the abbot of Wat Nanachat at that time – he was an American bhikkhu who had been a helicopter pilot in the Vietnam war. He introduced me to Ajahn Chah and said, 'This young man has been living in London. He lived near Hampstead where you stayed last year,' (my last digs having been in Primrose Hill). Ajahn Chah looked at me and, with no smile

at all, in a completely level voice, said a few words in Thai. Ajahn Pabhakaro had a wry smile as he translated, ‘The Ajahn said, “There are lots of pretty girls in Hampstead.”’

I’m not usually lost for words, I’m a wordy kind of a person, but at that moment, I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what to think either, because he was supposed to be a great spiritual master. I was confused: ‘How come he was noticing whether the women were pretty or not? And why did he say that to *me*? He is definitely not joking... or smiling... Is this some kind of secret special message? Or is he putting me down? I’m a spiritual person... beyond all of that kind of thing. I’ve grown out of that, let go of that kind of worldly interest... that’s all far behind me... or maybe it isn’t?...’. I didn’t know what to think but it had a powerful impact, because he was not joking, he was very serious in demeanour.

On later reflection I realized how that was a very helpful teaching because my thinking, my self-view had been, ‘I’m beyond all of that. I’ve seen through sexual desire and romance.’ But my hormones were busy doing something else. There were still the defilements. The heart was very much affected by sexual desire, so though the brain produced the lofty thought, ‘I’m beyond that,’ the heart needed far more training.

Ajahn Chah liked to test people. He would put something out there and see what you did with it. Maybe he was testing me to see whether I would

get angry, ‘What do you mean? I’m beyond that!’ Or perhaps he just said that to me since it was what arose in his mind in association with that moment. He may have been surprised when, six months later, I asked for *sāmaṇera* ordination but he never said, ‘Oh, you’re still here. You have endured and stayed around.’ He had seen many aspirants come and go, so he knew that, when it came to commitment to the monastic life, everything was ‘*my naer*’ – ‘uncertain!’

The second interaction we had also had a very powerful effect on me. I had become a *pakao*, an *anagārika*, an Eight Precept trainee, and Luang Por Chah was staying over at Wat Pah Nanachat; he would visit there for a few days from time to time. I was the attendant for Ajahn Pabhakaro in this period. It was my job to get his robes ready and to have his bowl clean and organized to go on alms-round in the morning. When Luang Por Chah was staying there it was my job to prepare Luang Por Chah’s robes and his bowl, as well as Ajahn Pabhakaro’s.

Normally I was quite good at this duty, but on this particular day when I woke up I thought, ‘I’ve woken up before my alarm, that’s good.’ The *kuṭīs* that we had in those days were very basic and there were cracks between the planks of the walls. My next thought was, ‘The moon is very bright tonight.’ But my next thought was the horrified realization, ‘That’s not the moon. That’s sunlight! Eeeeek! I’m late for the Ajahns!’ I looked at my clock.

It had stopped at something like one-twenty in the morning. I didn't have my own watch, just the clock, so I didn't know what time it really was.

I threw my robes on and rushed through the forest as fast as I could. When I got to the *sālā*, I saw that the time was six-twenty-five. They would go on the *pindapat* to Bung Wai village at six-thirty. I thought, 'Phew. Five minutes, I've got five minutes. It's OK. I can do it. I'm in the clear.' Again, not being terribly honest with myself or with the Ajahns, I thought I would try to fake it and pretend that I had been around all the time – '... just maybe you didn't notice me.' I got the robes and arranged them on the Dhamma seat and organized the bowls. I was just doing up the tags at the bottom of Luang Por Chah's robe when he said a few words in Thai which I didn't understand. Ajahn Pabhakaro translated: 'What Luang Por said was:

"Sleep is delicious, huh?"

This time Ajahn Chah had a big smile, the foot wide grin that would appear from time to time; a heartfelt, totally warm smile. Once more, I didn't know what to think because here was the Ajahn, and I had done something wrong. I was the lazy novice, as in that old French song, 'Frère Jacques' – the monk who was supposed to be the bell ringer but was fast asleep and failed to ring the bell – '... *dormez vous?*' I was like Brother Jacques, who was still asleep. And yet there was this incredibly warm smile. There was no punishment, and no sense of 'You bad monk!'

It was an empathetic natural gesture of parental affection, ‘Yes, sleep is delicious.’ He wasn’t being cruel or sarcastic. He was just telling it straight. Sleep is delicious. It was like, ‘Yes, I’ve been there. I know.’ I already had a lot of faith in the *Buddha-sāsana* and in the forest monastic life at that point, but at that moment there was a deepening. I realized, ‘This is a different kind of institution. This is something I have never met before, where the boss, the big guy, sees you have messed up, it is totally public, but it is absolutely not a problem.’

I realized, ‘This person has complete authority in this community but he doesn’t seem to punish wrongdoers.’ Instead he empathized. Many times, when people said, ‘Oh, Luang Por, I’ve got a terrible problem. I am so jealous,’ Luang Por would say, ‘Yes, I was that way too.’ ‘I have so much anger. I blow up all the time!’ ‘Yes, I was that way too.’ ‘I’m filled with sexual desire. I can’t switch it off.’ ‘I was that way too.’ That was almost always his response – and he meant it. He would give people hilarious examples of his getting lost and caught up in anger, doubt, lust and fear – he had a lot of good stories. When people said, ‘You’re so wise, Luang Por. You understand things so well and you help so many people! You must have read many *suttas* and studied the *Abhidhamma!*’ He would reply, ‘No, not at all. If I have any wisdom it’s because I had a lot of *kilesa*, a lot of defilements. I’ve developed wisdom because of having a heart that would get really confused, angry, heated, and lost. The defilements have been my teachers.’



I could never guess what Ajahn Chah was going to say. When people came to visit, someone would be very polite, and would ask a good question. I'd think, 'That's interesting, I'm glad they got to ask that,' but Luang Por would completely ignore them; or look through them. I would think, 'That's strange. That person had quite a good question, how come he's ignoring them?' Later I'd realize it was probably because that person wanted to be noticed, it was more about, 'Look at me, how wise and important my questions are.' Which caused Luang Por to look right through them.

Then, with somebody else I'd think, 'This local politician is inflated and full of himself, overweight and wearing big gold rings. Luang Por's really going to let him have it.' And instead Luang Por would be very kind, humble and friendly with him. I'd think, 'Eh?' But Luang Por Chah would read the person rather than the appearance. He would read the situation. I could therefore never guess how he would react. It was great fun. Even though I couldn't understand Thai, Western monks or novices would usually be there to translate. That was a really helpful thing.

My very last interaction with Luang Por Chah occurred at the end of the Rains Retreat in 1979. I had received a telegram from my family in England, saying that my father had had a heart attack: 'Dad very ill, can you come?' I

therefore came down as fast as I could from the little branch monastery in Roi-Et where I had been staying, and made my way to Wat Pah Nanachat. Ajahn Jagaro, who was the abbot then, took me to see Luang Por Chah.

Luang Por spoke to me for about twenty minutes. Again, Ajahn Jagaro translated for me. He said, ‘Well, essentially Luang Por has said four things. He said, “Firstly – go to England. Take care of your business with your family. Pay respects to Ajahn Sumedho and come straight back here. Secondly – go to England, take care of business with your family, go and pay respects to Ajahn Sumedho and then stay with him for a year. Then, after a year, come back here. Thirdly, go to England, take care of your business with your family. When that’s done, pay respects to Ajahn Sumedho, stay with him and do your best to train with him and support him. But if you can’t stand it you can come back here if you have to. Fourthly – go to England, take care of your business with your family, then go and pay respects to Ajahn Sumedho. Live with him and don’t come back.” All of these four instructions had been delivered by Luang Por Chah in exactly the same tone of voice: ‘These are your instructions, follow them to the letter. They are what you should do!’ – but they were four completely different scenarios. This meant that the real instruction was, ‘You figure it out!’ This was how Luang Por Chah would be; you could never predict what he would say and you could never pin him down.



This leads to the third way we can speak about ‘Who was Ajahn Chah?’ Once when I was living at Wat Pah Pong I was doing something in the *sālā*. Luang Por Chah’s *kuṭī* was about 100 or 150 metres away from there. A group of visitors arrived and Ajahn Boonchu, the guest monk, said to me, ‘Could you go and let Luang Por know a large group of visitors have arrived and would like to see him.’ I scooted over to Luang Por’s *kuṭī*.

It was an unusual day since, at that moment, he was sitting completely by himself. No one else was around. He had his eyes closed, meditating. As I approached I saw this and I wondered, ‘What on earth should I do? Luang Por is meditating.’ I went up in front of him, and thought maybe he would notice me. Nothing happened. ‘Maybe I should go back and tell Ajahn Chu... but he will just send me back again...’ I hesitated. Finally I knelt by Ajahn Chah’s feet and said, ‘Luang Por?’ He opened his eyes and – there was absolutely nobody there. There was *no person* there. He was looking at me, but when I looked back I looked into a bottomless well. It’s hard to describe, but there was nobody there, and then, *whoop!* the ‘person’ arrived. Ajahn Chah came back into being, if you can understand what I mean by that. Initially there was just a vast empty space and then, *whoop!* – as if to say, ‘Alright, I’ve got to do “the Ajahn Chah thing”; here we are.’ He engaged with me, asking, ‘*Arai?* What is it?’ I said, ‘Tan Ajahn Boonchu

asked me to let you know a tour bus of visitors are in the *sālā*, they would like to pay respects to you.’ He cracked a joke in the Isan dialect that I didn’t understand, got up and went over.

What impacted me so profoundly that day was seeing the process of a being manifesting. Initially there had been no person there at all and then, suddenly, *whoop!* The Ajahn Chah persona was ‘put on’, like putting on his robe – Ajahn Chah literally put on his personality.

The word ‘person’ in English is very interesting because it comes from the Latin *persōna* which means a mask. When we say a ‘person’ – that’s a mask. He was literally putting on his social mask, yet there was no lack of sincerity there either. Ajahn Chah performed many roles, he had many personas and he wore them all wholeheartedly. He could be super strict, he could be cheerful, he could be incredibly funny, he could be extremely cold and distant. He could do the whole theatre; there was a perfect adaptability, and he did whatever was appropriate to the occasion.

This third approach to ‘who’ Ajahn Chah was is well represented by the little book called *No Ajahn Chah*, a collection of his teachings in very brief quotations. It begins with a pair of conversations. One day a visitor came to Wat Pah Pong, he met Ajahn Chah and he asked, ‘Who is Ajahn Chah?’ And, pointing to his chest, Ajahn Chah said, ‘This one, this is Ajahn Chah,’ because that was the level of that person’s understanding. But another time

somebody else came to Wat Pah Pong to pay respects to him and asked the same question, ‘Who is Ajahn Chah?’ To this man Ajahn Chah replied, ‘There is no Ajahn Chah.’ There he was, sitting, looking at the person, and he said, ‘There is no Ajahn Chah.’

On another occasion, when somebody asked him, ‘How old are you? Do you live here year round?’ Luang Por’s response was, ‘I have no age and I don’t live anywhere...’. Now, as monks, we are not supposed to tell lies; we have to speak the truth. So how can you reconcile that? When he says, ‘I have no age. I don’t live anywhere,’ from a worldly perspective we can retort, ‘You have a birthday and therefore an age; and you live at Wat Pah Pong.’ But is this true? He was an Arahant and therefore incapable of speaking an untruth.

He was indeed speaking the truth when he said, ‘I have no age’ because the ‘Ajahn Chah’ whom I encountered that day under his *kuṭī*, was the timeless reality that is aware. That which knows ‘the person’ is not a person. That which knows this body, this personality, is not a body, a personality. That awakened awareness is the heart of our reality, that knowing, the *poo roo*. That awareness knows ‘the person’, but it is not a ‘person’. It knows birth, but it is not born. It knows death, but it does not die. It is *akālika*, timeless; it is *ajāta*, unborn, it is *amara*, deathless. As my name, ‘Amaro’, means ‘deathless’, I have a clue to that quality as a daily reminder. I also live at

Amaravati, ‘The Deathless Realm’. I thus have a lot of prompts to help keep this quality in my mind.

This transcendent awareness is not just an attribute of this remarkable being, who was born in Bahn Gor a hundred years ago, it is at the very core of our own existence. The heart of our knowing, moment to moment, is this quality of awakened awareness, the *poo roo*. Luang Por Chah would say, ‘This is the real Refuge,’ the *poo roo*, or *daht roo*, ‘the element of knowing’. Awareness is our Refuge. We say *Buddham saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*, but we are not taking refuge merely in the idea of a great being, the masterful, magnificent teacher who lived around 2560 years ago. Rather the *poo roo* which is our Refuge is the awareness that is our own *citta*, our heart. This heart-awareness is our safe ‘place’, our true Refuge.

When we recognize Ajahn Chah in this way, it changes our perspective. When he says, ‘I have no age, I don’t live anywhere,’ that ‘I’, refers to the Dhamma itself. The Dhamma doesn’t have an age, right? The Dhamma doesn’t live anywhere; it is everywhere and nowhere – essentially, ‘location’ does not apply. The Dhamma is, selfless, timeless, unbounded by time and place, unbounded by identity and causality.

This is the most profound and therefore the truest way to understand who Ajahn Chah was. If we think Ajahn Chah was that personality, who was born in Bahn Gor a hundred years ago, we are missing the essence

of Ajahn Chah. Of course the conventional ‘Ajahn Chah’ is important, without his birth we wouldn’t have met that boundless wisdom that explained the true teachings and guided us to the true path; there would not be the wisdom-awareness manifested for us if that little boy had not been born. This profound mystery is part of Luang Por Chah’s teaching – that, through the limited and time-bound window of our earthly life, bounded by our birth and our death, we are able to know the Deathless, the Unborn, the Unconditioned.

The Buddha himself, the Bodhisatta Siddhattha Gotama, was born in Lumbini and grew up in Kapilavatthu. A body was born, a life began – but through the window of the Buddha’s life, awareness was able to know the timeless, the unborn, undying Dhamma, and to awaken to its nature. That is the reality of the Dhamma; the reality of this body, this mind, this world. Nature is Dhamma itself, they are not two.

This was also a principle that Luang Por Chah spoke about in terms of spiritual training. The *suttas* describe how the followers of the Buddha first come to *listen* to Dhamma, then they *comprehend* the Dhamma, then they *practise* the Dhamma and finally *realize* the Dhamma. That succession is found in quite a number of the teachings. Luang Por Chah added a fifth one, which he termed ‘*being* Dhamma’. Thus: hearing Dhamma, understanding Dhamma, practising Dhamma, realizing Dhamma and then finally being Dhamma.

If the progress of realization is reflected upon in this way it is understood that it is not as though you were not the Dhamma and then you became it. Rather it is realizing that, ‘Every aspect of this body, this mind, the world, has always been a part of nature. How could it not be?’ Even the paper of a book, a wooden table, that was a tree. Even an iPad or a computer screen – the metal, the plastic, the glass all came out of the ground, the waters and the air. The plastic was made from oil, pumped out of the ground. Every aspect of the material world, including our body, every aspect of our mind, our noble thoughts, our *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, *upekkhā*, our *paññā*; but also our anger, fear, desire and worry, all are aspects of nature. All are aspects of Dhamma. They are part of the natural order.

This realization, ‘being Dhamma’, changes our view of ‘what we are’, our view of what everything is; it is the seeing of all things in terms of Dhamma. ‘Being Dhamma’ was thus one of the most profound and beautiful ways that Luang Por Chah spoke about the practice.

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Another of the things that was really amazing to me, and a suitable point to finish with, was that, even though Ajahn Chah was very strict and orthodox as a monk, and was rigorous and exacting with the Vinaya discipline, when you were with him you realized, ‘This is the happiest man in the world. This is a man who has no limits. He has no boundary. Yet he follows all these

rules and he has no time to himself; he has people visiting all day every day. He has so many disciples, so many branch monasteries. How is it that this person with so many obligations, so many rules, such full days, such tight discipline – how come he is totally free?’

What arose in my heart, when I was around him as a novice was, ‘Whatever I have to do to get to be like that, I’ll do it. No problem! He has a body, he has a personality, he has a lot of responsibilities – but he is totally free. Whatever it takes to be that way, I will do it.’

For us to actualize that aspiration we have to respect both the conventional truth and the ultimate truth. If we focus just on the conventional, then we’re paying attention just to the rules and the routines and the words of the teaching. We have no feeling for that which is beyond, that which is unborn, undying, which is unlimited, that which is free. You can be a very good, obedient nun or monk, or a very good lay person who does everything ‘properly’, but there is no freedom in the heart. You have learnt how to be obedient, to obey the rules of the system, but you’ve only learned how to be obedient. The heart is not free.

Similarly, if we focus solely on the ultimate truth, liberation and the transcendent, then we might start to go without bathing and failing to do our laundry. We stop paying attention to the people around us, and our behaviour may get unconsciously driven by conceit, desire, fear and

aversion. We may become selfish and insensitive. Basically we can become a real headache to others. By trying to not care for ‘the things of the world’ we may be creating a lot of negative karma.

In the West it has been popular to claim, ‘You don’t need any Precepts – those are for children. Ultimate Reality, that’s the only thing that matters. Ignore the Precepts. Everything is Dharma.’ This distortion of view has happened in many spiritual circles in the West, particularly in the ’60s and ’70s, but also today. Westerners like to think, ‘I’ll just take the ultimate path, no need to bother with the rest’ and they dismiss conventional concerns.

This unbalanced approach creates a lot of bad karma, because it comes from a self-centred and deluded egoism. The painful results of unskilful actions come home to roost, because even if we want to ignore conventional rules, the police will not. The person who has to pay for your dinner at the restaurant will not ignore it. Or the person who has to do all the dishes, because you can’t be bothered, will not ignore this.

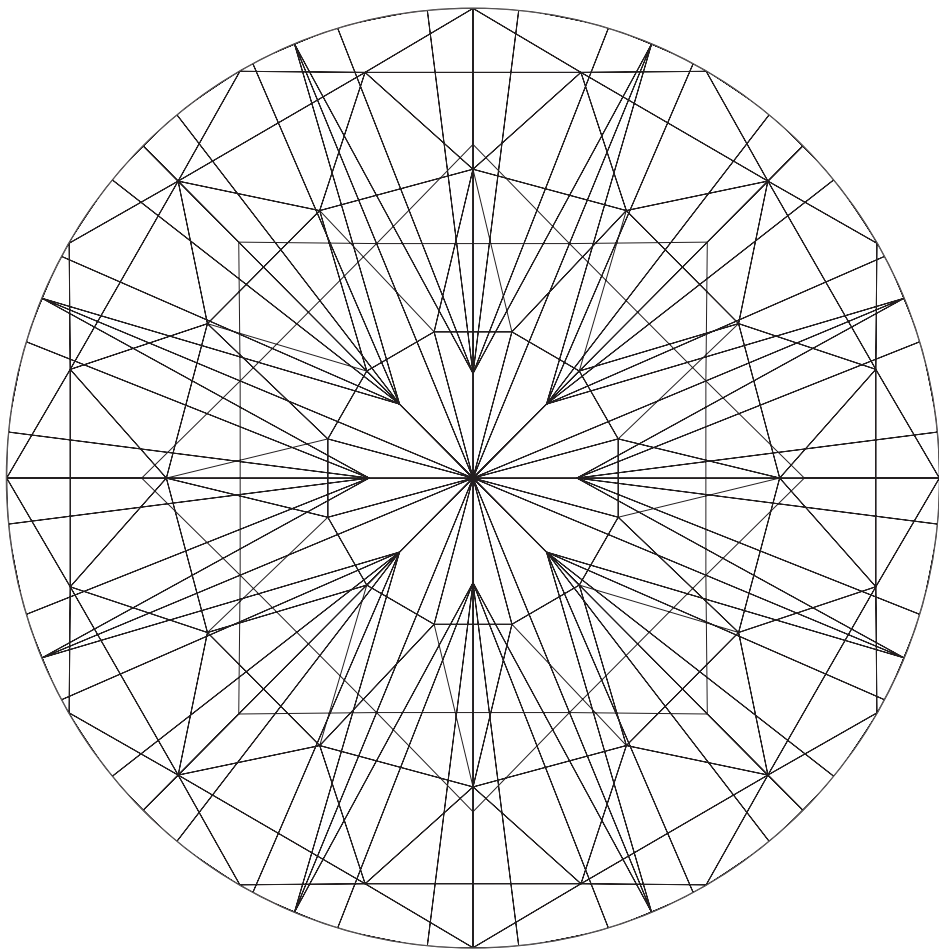
Luang Por Chah therefore explained many times that we have to respect both the conventional and the ultimate. If we do, then we will find that the precepts and conventions we follow do not limit us. They are the means whereby the supportive environments can be created, in which the ultimate truth can be recognized. We follow the Precepts and live as well-integrated human beings, as good people, because this creates the most harmonious

modes of life, that help us to realize that ultimate reality of the Unborn, the Unconditioned, the Deathless.

In honour of Luang Por Chah's 100th birth anniversary, Ajahn Jayasāro published his biography, entitled *Stillness Flowing*. This title comes from one of the last teaching similes that Luang Por used before he had the stroke that stopped him from being able to speak. When people came to visit him, he would say, sometimes, 'Have you ever seen flowing water?' They would say, 'Yes, of course.' He would then say, 'Have you ever seen still water?' They would say something like, 'Yes, there's some in your glass.' 'So you've seen still water, and you've seen flowing water. Have you ever seen "still, flowing water"? Do you know what that is?' Usually people would be a bit flummoxed by this and not know what to say. Once he had let the question hover for long enough, he would then explain, 'The mind is like still, flowing water.'

It flows. Perceptions and thoughts, they flow. There is a conventional world of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. Our moods, they come and go and change, they flow all the time. But then, along with that flow, there is stillness. There is the timeless quality of awareness, that quality of knowing; that which knows the flow is not flowing. It is always absolutely here, now. It is the very centre of our world, and being unconnected to or limited by time and space, it's perfectly, absolutely still – at peace.

It is not a moving thing that has stopped but it is a reality that is free from time and space. That perfect spacious stillness of the heart is that which knows the movement of the perceptions, thoughts and moods. The mind is therefore like still, flowing water; there is stillness and there is flowing. The flow doesn't disturb the stillness; the stillness doesn't obstruct the flow; they are both present together. There is the conventional and the ultimate, the worldly (*lokiya*) and that which is above the world (*lokuttara*), and they work together.



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